

A CYCLICAL STRUCTURE OF CHRISTIAN EXISTENCE

A Revelatory View of History,  
Based on a Theory of Cyclical Expansion

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
the Faculty of the  
School of Theology at Claremont

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements of the Degree  
Doctor of Religion

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by  
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*This dissertation, written by*

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Date *June 5, 1975*

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*We shall not cease from exploration  
and the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.*

*. . . .*

*A condition of complete simplicity  
(Costing not less than everything)  
And all shall be well and  
All manner of thing shall be well  
When the tongues of flame are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire  
And the fire and the rose are one.*

T.S. Eliot

Four Quartets

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the cyclical structure of primitive existence and the historical structure of biblical existence in terms of an emerging synthesis of these disparate notions in a structure for Christian existence based upon a theory of expanding *circles* that go out from, and return to, a once-for-all point. It is based upon an apocalyptic, or revelatory view of history that develops the motifs of journey, quest, home and homecoming in biblical, as well as secular, literature. It provides a theological treatment of time and history, with its implications for concepts of the future, the Parousia, the New Creation.

The cyclical characteristic of the structure reasserts the primitive basis for the validity of myth, symbol, and ritual, while the characteristic of expansion in the structure accedes to a qualified notion of historical progression. The result is an integrative view of revelation in history that is, by the nature of what it asserts, unique, paradoxical and self-transcending existence, i.e., Christian existence.

The first chapter asserts the ambiguity of meaning inherent in the *concept* of history. Human existence is essentially historical in its drive towards self-realization. In this sense it is revelatory as it seeks existential significance in the affairs of men and their relationship to the Divine. The second chapter outlines the two basic structures from which existence has normally been viewed; the attempt here however, is to re-assert the evolutionary development of the inherent -- and not necessarily antithetical -- characteristics of each

structure. With this accomplished, their synthesis in a model of cyclical expansion can be considered; this constitutes the main body of the thesis. In the fourth chapter the relevance of such a structure is subjected to questions of finality and contemporaneity; such a claim is based on the assertion that the idea of tragedy in the modern world (the true picture of human existence) is truncated in the secular vision, but affirmed in Christianity. The Quest remains the authentic, but paradoxical, motif of sanctified, yet unrealized, existence..

## INTRODUCTION

### A. Preface

In his book, *Essays in the Philosophy of History*, R.B. Collingwood writes: "In a short essay, slightly written, anyone can expound a plausible system of historical cycles."<sup>1</sup> With such nominal encouragement I present my own modest attempts! It is my hope, however, that this present effort, while proceeding out of the milieu of cyclical cliches, achieves a discontinuity from them. For that is the hope of all cyclical notions of history; that is, to elude and transcend the confines of historical existence so as to grasp some understanding of the historical process. It is soon realized that this cannot be done outside the realm of history, but only within it. The only appropriate stance is one of cautiously-guarded camaraderie with all the other "plausibilities". Only then can I hope to avoid the pitfalls, and steer my way clear to a fresh outlook over the well-trodden path. For in the end I hardly intend to proclaim the demise of the Age of Struggle, but rather embrace it in its fullest realities. Only then can I live the paradox that is my faith, that is my hope, that is the Grace-filled tension of authentic existence. An admirable endeavor!

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R.G. Collingwood, The Idea of History (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1956), p. 75.

### B. Statement of Purpose

The purpose then of this dissertation is to examine the cyclical structure of primitive existence and the historical structure of biblical existence in terms of the emerging synthesis of these disparate notions in a structure for Christian existence based upon a theory of expanding *circles* that go out from, and return to, a once-for-all point. It is based upon an apocalyptic, or revelatory view of history that develops the motifs of journey, quest, home and homecoming in biblical, as well as secular, literature. It provides a theological treatment of time and history, with its implications for concepts of the future, the Parousia, the New Creation.

The cyclical characteristic of the structure reasserts the primitive basis for the validity of myth, symbol, and ritual, while the characteristic of expansion in the structure accedes to a qualified notion of historical progression. The result is an integrative view of revelation in history that is, by the nature of what it asserts, unique, paradoxical and self-transcending existence, i.e. Christian existence.

### C. Statement of Direction

We will begin by considering the concept of history with its ambiguity of meaning. Human existence is essentially historical in its drive towards self-realization. In this sense it is revelatory as it seeks existential significance in the affairs of men and their relationship to the Divine. The second chapter outlines the two



basic structures from which existence has normally been viewed; our attempt however, is to re-assert the evolutionary development of the inherent -- and not necessarily anti-thetical -- characteristics of each structure. With this accomplished, their synthesis in a model of cyclical expansion can be considered. In the fourth chapter the relevance of such a structure is subjected to questions of finality and contemporaneity; such a claim is based on the assertion that the idea of tragedy in the modern world (the true picture of human existence) is truncated in the secular vision, but affirmed in Christianity. The Quest remains the authentic, but paradoxical, motif of sanctified, yet unrealized, existence.

Admittedly the following is an attempt at a *non-systematic* theology. The nature of the project necessitates a broad and integrative approach. Every effort has been made to confine the development of the thesis to those areas which contribute directly to the purpose of the subject matter; that is, to test the validity of this theory of cyclical expansion as it constitutes a viable structure of Christian existence.

## Chapter I

### THE CONCEPT AND MEANING OF HISTORY

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AS A STRUCTURE OF EXISTENCE

*The problem of history as a whole is unanswerable within its own perspective. Historical processes as such do not bear the least evidence of a comprehensive and ultimate meaning. History as such has no outcome. There never has been and never will be an immanent solution of the problem of history, for man's historical experience is one of steady failure.*

Karl Löwith<sup>1</sup>

#### I. THE CONCEPT OF HISTORY

##### A. The Nature of History: The Problem

In his book, History as Myth, W. Taylor Stevenson summarizes the two prominent characteristics of all contemporary thought: the first is an almost sacral worship of the scientific method; the second is our contemporary approach to the world by a commitment to thinking 'historically'.<sup>2</sup> This is hardly novel revelation when we consider the development of the philosophy of history in the Western world to be little more than an elaborate, but repeated attempt to harness the fuller realities of man in his world by the methodological categorization of 'facts' and 'events' about those greater reali-

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Löwith, Meaning in History (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 191.

<sup>2</sup> W. Taylor Stevenson, History as Myth (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), p. 9.

ties.

There is, consequently, a seemingly unavoidable dichotomy between the good intentionality and the plain reality of historical studies. And that is that history, by its nature, *is* the world of man -- man in all his self-realized finiteness; and all historical thinking is, necessarily, the self-limiting indulgence of man in his compelling quest for existential meaning. As a result it might be said that all history is an attempt simultaneously to comprehend, fulfill, elude, and transcend itself. And man, the historian, is left with the notion that the more he can comprehend what is happening around him, the better he can solve his perpetual predicaments, and grasp the meaning beyond his existential situation. As Gordon Kaufman put it: "The problem is whether there is *any significant reality at all* 'above' or 'beyond' or 'below' the world which we know in our experience, or whether life is to be understood simply in this-worldly, i.e., secular terms."<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the basic nature of history, we might say, is the problem of history. Exactly how, or in what manner, man has tried to overcome the problem of history is the history of man himself. This is not a static, but a dynamic, condition of man's existential reality. And if there is a 'progress' to history it is most evident in the acuteness of this condition for modern man in his increasing awareness of a *static* sense of non-direction and non-being *within* the dynamic dimension of the historical process. This critical awareness,

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Ibid., p. 4.

however, is the result of the evolution of man's historical consciousness as can be seen in the development of the philosophy of history.

#### B. The Philosophy of History: Diversity & Development of the Dilemma

The definitive purpose of history can be stated, in general terms, as knowledge of the past in the process of present and future *human self-realization*. R.G. Collingwood would say that history is research or inquiry into human actions of the past, proceeding from the interpretation of empirical evidence for the purpose of human self-knowledge.<sup>4</sup> But the enigmatic nature of history, as we have described it in the section above, renders such a definition innocuous, if not downright useless, without considerable expansion, clarification and qualification. Consequently there is, within the definition of history itself, the emergence of a Western philosophy of history whose development is one of diversity within the confines of its own inherent limitations. It is hardly necessary here -- nor is it my attempt -- to outline this development in any systematic fashion. Rather my concern is in terms of the general characteristics common to all historical points of view; and that is the *dilemma* of history itself as conceived in its own development from the earliest beginnings of historical consciousness. Characteristically, I would propose, man approaches the concept of a philosophy of history *struc-*

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R.G. Collingwood, The Idea of History, pp. 9-10. See also Bauer's definition in Huizenga's article, "A Definition of the Concept of History," in Raymond Klibansky and H.J. Paton (eds.) Philosophy and History (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 9.

*turally*, perceiving it either in a linear and/or cyclical mode, in an effort spatially to transcend or temporally fulfill history. Here lies the central theme. These two structural modes -- antithetical in nature and intention -- are the essential basis for man's confrontation with the dilemma of his own historical existence. Their development is the development of a philosophy of history; and, as we shall see in the course of this exercise, it is this framework that constitutes a Western understanding of history. It is out of this structure for existence that a historical consciousness -- the dialectical dilemma of modern man -- emerges. It is our purpose here to see how the dual modality of this historical structure came into being.

For Collingwood the modern European idea of history is *scientific* history; it evolved out of, and is distinguished from, theocratic history and mythical theogony, which he refers to as "quasi-his-<sup>5</sup>tories". Theocratic history, according to Collingwood, is primarily concerned with the activities of divine beings, and how they, secondarily, employ and affect humans in their actions. Myth, he says, is not concerned with human actions at all. Rather it is merely the divine actions of the gods in a dateless past, whose historical language is quasi-temporal; the idea of a time succession is to be taken only metaphorically. These two forms of quasi-history, theocratic history and myth, dominated the civilizations of the Ancient Near East until the rise of Greece.

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Ibid., p. 15.

The Greek historians of the fifth century grasped a new sense of history. Their interest lay with the human individual. As a result they regarded history not as myths or legends of a dateless 'pre-historic' past, but as a science of *human* actions capable of being analyzed. Thus history, for the Greek, was now principally humanistic, not theocratic; man's attentions were turned *τὰ ἀνθρώπινα* instead of *τὰ θεῖα*.

The Greek concept fulfills Collingwood's four essential characteristics of history: that it is scientific (inquisitive), humanistic, rational (empirical), and self-revelatory.<sup>6</sup> These elements are critical; they express the historical viewpoint of such early Greek historians as Herodotus and Thucydides. The impetus behind their 'histories', as Collingwood puts it, was to 'minister to man's knowledge of man.'<sup>7</sup> The purpose of history was not merely to record *what* men did, but to attempt to rationally understand *why* they did what they did as well.

Herodotus does not confine his attention to bare events; he considers these events in a thoroughly humanistic manner as actions of human beings who had reasons for acting as they did: and the historian is concerned with these reasons.<sup>8</sup>

At the end of Book One of The Peloponnesian War, Thucydides expresses his desire not only to offer an accurate report of the events that transpired, but to afford an understanding, that man might learn from the mistakes of the past and so determine his confrontation with the future.

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<sup>6</sup>  
Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>7</sup>  
Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>8</sup>  
Ibid., p. 19.

I do not think that one will be far wrong in accepting the conclusions I have reached from the evidence which I have put forward. It is better evidence than that of poets, who ... are lost in the unreliable streams of mythology. We may claim instead to have reached conclusions which are reasonably accurate, considering that we have been dealing with ancient history ... It will be enough for me, however, if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future.<sup>9</sup>

Such scientific investigation was presumed possible because of the self-revelatory nature of history; that is, that every human event, if it could be pursued completely, would manifest its full meaning in a rational manner accessible to the empirical process. However, it was Aristotle, in his Poetics, who thought of history only as a mere collection of facts; and it is notable that he considered poetry to be more scientific than such history, because poetry extracts universal truths from those facts. Thus poetry became the "distilled essence of the teaching of history," while history itself remained a "mere aggregate of perceptions."<sup>10</sup> Thus from the very birth of their historical consciousness the Greeks had soon realized the limitations to their concept of history.

This should not surprise us when we consider the fact that the growth of Greek historical thought was based on an emphatic *anti-historical* metaphysics. As a metaphysical principle, they reasoned, genuine knowledge must be permanent, eternal, unchanging (as with the

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Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War.

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Collingwood, The Idea of History, p. 24.

development of mathematics); but history is conceived of as a science of human actions based upon change, temporality and mortal finiteness. Thus for the Greeks the historical process could only be known to the extent that it could be perceived; and historical knowledge could never be demonstrative truth, but rather nothing more than individual opinion. This was Plato's contention.

For history must have these two characteristics: first it must be about what is transitory, and secondly it must be scientific or demonstrative. But on this theory what is transitory cannot be demonstratively known; it cannot be the object of science; it can only be a matter of *αἰσθησις*, perception, whereby human sensibility catches the fleeting moment as it flies.<sup>11</sup>

Plato speaks of those "fleeting moments" as the intermediate reality of perceptions; they are something more than sheer illusion, though less than any complete intelligibility of the Eternal.

Yet such a metaphysical predicament did not frustrate the Greek's quest for the Ideal, the unchanging and eternal object of knowledge. As Collingwood observes: "The Greek pursuit of the eternal was as eager as it was precisely because the Greeks themselves had an unusually vivid sense of the temporal."<sup>12</sup> In fact it was out of their sensitivity for the recognition of, and reconciliation with, this impermanent and often violent nature of constant flux that the Greeks developed such an acute historical consciousness. On the one hand, the Greek knew that the only thing that was predictable in the cataclysmic changes of nature and human events was the sheer unpredictability of the divine powers that determined the course of his-

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<sup>11</sup>

Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>12</sup>

Ibid., p. 22.



tory. On the other hand, one's perceptions of this unintelligible history were of a definite value. For Plato "right opinion" was a form of pseudo-knowledge, affording man the ability to discern basic principles: certain actions are likely to produce certain consequent reactions; there is a seemingly repetitive rhythm to basic changes; there can be determined a fair expectation of certain results from certain actions or changes. The Greek concept of fate is not deterministic, however; there was no permanently-set inevitability to whatever tragedy might befall man in his life. Here we must recall the self-revelatory aspect of history: "The Greeks had a lively and indeed a naive sense of the power of man to control his own destiny, and thought of this power as limited only by the limitations of his knowledge."<sup>13</sup>

It was natural therefore, that the Greek historical consciousness led to a historical methodology that consisted in the proper selection of right opinions. By the utilization of his rational faculties man was capable of *making* history -- or at least shaping his personal destiny -- in the sense of living prudently in a corruptible world.

This purely pragmatic value which Platonism especially relegated to history is most clearly understood in the spatial conceptualities of time and eternity. Time, as *chronos*, represented a changing, but accountable, succession of movements. With the development of certain empirical principles of historical man (i.e., repetitive

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<sup>13</sup>

Ibid., p. 24.

rhythms) another structural image emerged, namely *cyclos*. E. Lampert, in The Apocalypse of History, succinctly proceeds round full circle the implications for such a Greek notion of cyclical existence:

Time is the Wheeling of perpetual recurrence, a cyclic movement which yet entails no real change, for like the planetary course, it returns incessantly on itself. Time, the moving image of eternity, is the effluence of planets, ... and though, unlike the heavenly calm and harmony, the circlings of human life are confused and wandering, we are drowned in the perpetual cycle of invariable and ultimately meaningless facts, the same everywhere and always, of birth, and hunger, and decay, and death.<sup>14</sup>

This ahistorical notion of history is certainly anti-historical in tendency. It is an attempt to elude and transcend the limits of 'natural' history towards ahistorical existence, "beyond man's proximate concerns toward life's ultimate."<sup>15</sup> For the Greeks, eternity was conceived of as utter timelessness; yet the vision is unrealizable in human existence. And the Greeks soon discovered that to rid oneself of the confines of time (*chronos*), is to enslave oneself to the eternal perpetuation of endless time (*cyclos*). The problem of history -- that is, the nature of history itself -- is here fundamentally complete. Greek man, in the development of his historical consciousness, finds himself equipped with limited, finite, temporal perceptions with which to approximate historical probabilities of his life, in blind sight of the knowledge of eternal Reality. It is an inquiry into the past in order to predict the future; but this is only possible to the

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<sup>14</sup>

E. Lampert, The Apocalypse of History (London: Faber & Faber, 1948), p. 16.

<sup>15</sup>

Ralph G. Wilburn, The Historical Shape of Faith (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), p. 15.

extent that the future repeats the past. The intention of the Greek idea of cyclical time was to free man from the frightful meaninglessness of the ever-changing unknown of successive time. Yet the indefinite repetition of cyclic changes is devoid of meaning as well; it even denies its own self-transcendence by always reverting back to the same point, incapable of bursting its own limitations.

Its very conception of Time allowed of no other way to overcome the torments and tragedy of the Time-process than by assuming two disparate and irreconcilable realms, the temporal and the eternal, and by escaping the fiery wheel of temporality: in other words, by seeking for what is meaningful outside and above History, in the eternal repose of divine unchangeableness.<sup>16</sup>

Even the pragmatic value of historical consciousness, for the Greek, was not exempt from the debilitating effects of the essential nature of history. As Collingwood observes: "As this process goes on it produces a kind of defeatism about historical accuracy and an unconsciousness in the historical mind as such."<sup>17</sup>

The development of a Greek philosophy of history can be regarded conclusively as a dualistic approach to the concept of history. It involved, simultaneously, involvement in the temporal affairs of man, comprehending the future in terms of the past, while at the same time, knowing full well that full intelligibility was impossible, progress was illusory, and that what was eternal and timeless was beyond the realm of history. History represented all the limitations to

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<sup>16</sup>

E. Lampert, The Apocalypse of History, p. 17-18.

<sup>17</sup>

Collingwood, The Idea of History, p. 45.

man's full self-realization; but paradoxically, only in the total immersion in history -- in the continual struggle to comprehend his own affairs -- could man hope to elude and transcend his existential situation.

Beginning with the Greeks the framework is set for the whole of a Western philosophy of history. The diversity within its development consists of those simultaneously-progressive-and-repeated attempts to deal with the problematic nature of history. History, says Collingwood, is an account of the past; and the study of history is the re-enactment of past experience.

How, or on what conditions, can the historian know the past? In considering this question, the first point to notice is that the past is never given a fact which he can apprehend empirically by perception ... The historian must re-enact the past in his own mind.<sup>18</sup>

This historical methodology one can link with Collingwood's notion of progress. Historical progress, he says, is not merely an evolutionary process, as with nature -- though a correlation can be made on the basis of 'natural improvement'. The problem of the applicability of any 'improvement' principle lies, of course, in the determining of a standard of valuation. To avoid this, historical progress can simply be defined as *succession*: "Historical progress is only another name for human activity itself, as a succession of acts, each of which arises out of the last."<sup>19</sup> Their causal relationship requires a point of reference beyond the two individual successive events; and it is

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<sup>18</sup>

Ibid., p. 282.

<sup>19</sup>

Ibid., p. 324.

that realm of reference that man strives to achieve. For Collingwood however, true to the Greek precedence of all historical thinking, man perceives that referential dimension to historical progress only as it actualizes itself in specific and recognizable happenings.

The idea of historical progress, then, if it refers to anything, refers to the coming into existence not merely of new actions or thoughts or situations belonging to the same specific type, but of new specific types.<sup>20</sup>

It is like a disjunctive process of evolution; disjunctive in the naive hope of self-transcendence; and evolutionary in the sense of requiring standards of not only recognizing the novelty of a transitory change, but of conferring value on it as well. In order for change to be regarded as true change, and not simply illusion, it must be judged as having *become* better or worse than whatever preceded it. And here lies the self-deceptive pitfall: it is the discriminatory process of labelling historical periods as ages of greatness and ages of failure. By such an act, the historian loses all intention to pass through history and beyond it.

At the present day we are constantly presented with a view of history as consisting in this way of good and bad periods, the bad periods being divided into the primitive and the decadent, according as they come before or after the good ones. This distinction between periods of primitiveness, periods of greatness, and periods of decadence, is not and never can be historically true.<sup>21</sup>

And the reason it can never be historically "true", I would argue, is because such a view is not really progressive at all, but cyclical; for it is the stated pattern of primitive existence, giving rise to a

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<sup>20</sup>

Ibid., p. 324.

<sup>21</sup>

Ibid., p. 327.

great civilization, that crumbles in decadent ruin. The validity of such an assertion of cyclicism lies within the so-called 'progressive' view of history itself. It has the characteristic of what I would call the "leap-frog" effect, where the presupposition is that each cycle improves upon the past by learning from the mistakes of their predecessor. It is the "pigeon-holing" mentality Collingwood refers to when speaking of those historians who (down through the 'ages') systematize and categorize their learning in just such a manner. "This is the origin of all those schemes and patterns into which history has again and again, with surprising docility, allowed itself to be forced by such men as Vico, with his pattern of historical cycles ..."<sup>22</sup>

It is of peculiar interest that Vico, who has been dubbed the father of modern history, based his whole approach in New Science (1725), upon the notion of historical cycles. Reacting against the Cartesian imperative of relying solely upon those 'clear and distinct ideas', Vico was committed to determining a historical consciousness beyond empirical evidence alone. By studying the similarity and recurrence of certain characteristics of historical periods Vico could deduce a pattern of development. The principle characteristic of each period was that it could be envisaged as a complete entity, having a beginning, middle and an end -- all of which suggested a directive purpose to history. Because the idea of progress was important, Vico's historical cycles were never conceived of as the fixed phases

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<sup>22</sup>

Ibid., p. 264.

of a circle, but as differentiated somehow in spiral movement.<sup>23</sup> However, that point of differentiation, I would suggest, may in fact be no more than the succession of one period upon another. It is still the leap-frog effect; each succeeding participant in the historical drama repeats the same action in a purposeful progression that is moving toward some indistinguishable end.

From Vico we can trace a succession (if not a progression) of philosophies of history that have proposed a theory of cycles. As Collingwood says: "Everyone who has any historical knowledge at all sees history in cycles."<sup>24</sup> We need only briefly allude to some here; though they may vary in their perspective, biases, and ends sought, their theoretical foundation remains essentially the same. Hegel, for instance, sought to discover the final purpose to the repeated sufferings of history of the Universal Spirit (Reason), returning to successive phases, in new levels of fulfillment toward some spiritual fulfillment. There is also Nietzsche's concept of "eternal recurrence," a cycle comprising of human decisions and natural occurrences. The problem of history -- perceived as the antinomy between human will and cosmic fate -- transcends all human trappings in the superman Zarathustra. In addition there is the positivistic naturalism of Spengler, and later, Toynbee. In his Decline of the West, Spengler asserts the predetermination of history based upon the unavoidable fulfillment, or

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Ibid., pp. 67-68.

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R.G. Collingwood, Essays in the Philosophy of History (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), p. 89.

succession, of cultural life-cycles. Though he argues for a purposelessness to the direction of history, he nevertheless speaks of non-cyclical time as being directed toward some future.

Repetition and progression; these are the two antithetical dimensions of all historical thinking. Yet here is the curious fact: it is only through historical *thinking* that progress comes about at all. And, for progress to be forward-looking, and not simply forward-moving as with succession, it must maintain a sense of continuity with the past. This continuity lies with historical thinking which re-enacts the past in order to understand its implications for the future.

This understanding of the system we set out to supercede is a thing which we must retain throughout the work of superceding it, as a knowledge of the past conditioning our creation of the past conditioning our creation of the future.<sup>25</sup>

We maintain and repeat the past in an effort to free ourselves from it. It is our total immersion in history where we flounder, continually seeking understanding; only then can we hope to emerge and gasp new breath. The hope of understanding is then the impetus for all historical thinking and questing. The consequences of our failing at this task is spelled out by Collingwood as the very conclusion to his Idea of History.

It may be impossible to do this (understand) ... But if that is so, there will once more, as so often in the past, be change but no progress; we shall have lost our hold on one group of problems in our anxiety to solve the next. And we ought by now to realize that no kindly law of nature will save us from the fruits of our ignorance.<sup>26</sup>

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Collingwood, The Idea of History, p. 334.

26

Ibid.



The real truth of such an admonition, as we will see, has come to fruition in the historical consciousness of modern secular man.

### C. The Modern Dilemma: The Terror of History

*If the answer is that there is no other reality than historical reality, and if historical reality is understood in the usual way as being only that which man has created, then we are indeed presented with the heady but terrifying prospect of a universe grounded in man alone.*<sup>27</sup>

Löwith has observed that, "with the gradual dissolution of the eighteenth-century belief in reason and progress, philosophy of history<sup>28</sup> became more or less homeless." As a consequence of this dissolution the modern condition of secular man's historical consciousness might be described as *posthistorical*. The symptomatic process has been a progressively-acute realization (by the fact of its sheer repetition!) that the power of reason is an illusion, and the idea of progress a delusion. The universe can no longer be conceived of as rational, eternal, divine, and capable of some degree of human comprehension as it was from the time of the Greeks; nor is it created, transient and redemptive as it has been for Christianity. The two basic approaches to the understanding of history -- cyclic motion and what we will call eschatological direction -- seem to have been exhausted; modern history has become consecutively both of these, and neither of these.

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<sup>27</sup>

Stevenson, History as Myth, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup>

Löwith, Meaning in History, p. 1.

(This is the basic thesis of Lowith's book.) In his striving to transcend or fulfill the limitations of history modern secular man has moved beyond the historical structures by the sheer negation of them. The result has hardly been transcendence however, but mere existence, that is, a purposeless void. History begs for purpose, a way to recognize meaning, or at least affirm one's hope of it. But modern man does not believe that any human intelligibility of history is possible; nor does he believe in guidance, either by fate or by providence. There is no order or predestination to the universe. Any concept of future is meaningless; all that counts is man's freedom to will his own actions in the present '*Now*'. This is not revealed however, as the quiet resolve of the stoic, but as despair in the face of terror. Man has always conceived of existence historically, that is temporally; being and time had an interdependent relationship. The Greeks discovered that transcending time in exclusively cyclical terms had desperate consequences. Conversely, the negation of time within historical existence is self-destructive as well. Modern man is faced with his own non-being. He has abandoned all previous approaches to living historically; yet he can find no other options. The modern dilemma is man's self-actualized realization that he is becoming less and less able to 'make' history, as his efforts to do so become increasingly meaningless. This is what Eliade has described as the "Terror" of history.

It is becoming more and more doubtful ... if modern man can make history. On the contrary, the more modern he becomes -- that is, without defences against the terror of history -- the less chance he has of himself making history.<sup>29</sup>

Modern man has become historical man in a post-historical age, where the historical structures for existence have crumbled as the content of those structures have been deemed anachronistic and without meaning. The result is mere existence that is more static than cyclic, for there is no meaning to its unalterable and unintelligible repetition. It is a condition evidenced by alienation and despair, the *amor fati*, and resolute pessimism -- all upheld as heroic virtues in philosophies of relativism, nihilism, and twentieth century secular existentialism. The modern figure is that of the absurd hero and the non-savior; he is Sisyphus. And as Camus puts it, his resolute *joy* is the freedom of knowing -- finally *knowing* -- there is nothing beyond the repeated struggle up the mountainside with one's shoulder to the rock of suffering.<sup>30</sup> In reality such a man is the contemporary phoenix who descends to the world of death and temporality never to pass through the flames to new life, but to be consumed and perish.

It is evident that modern man must reconcile himself to his own historical consciousness and re-embrace the natural dilemma of history if he is to rid himself of the denominative terror of modern existence, and rise to a challenge of hope for something in and beyond the scope of man.

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Mircea Eliade, Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. 156.

30

Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus (New York: Knopf, 1955), p. 91.

## II. THE MEANING OF HISTORY

*Beneath the star of the promise  
of God it becomes possible to  
experience reality as "history."*

Jurgen Moltmann,  
*Theology of Hope*<sup>31</sup>

We have said that the nature of history is the problem of history; and we have seen that the problem of history is the problem of meaning. Meaning *in* history is the only viable alternative to the desparate existence of modern man. We know that the enigmatic nature of history has always rendered the idea of meaning to be as limiting as the course of human events themselves; but we know, as well, that we can no longer hope to transcend the limitations of history through elusion, either by eternal cyclicism or the sheer negation of historical existence. Rather a *transhistorical* model for *metahistorical* meaning must be found in the *fulfillment* of history itself. It is fully within history then that we undertake to develop a greater historical consciousness which we will call a 'revelatory view of history', based upon a particular structure of existence that is essentially Christian. This is the quest for ultimate meaning that is our ultimate concern.

### A. The Quest: History as Revelation

Beginning with Martin Kahler in the last century there has developed a school of thought which attempts to distinguish between

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<sup>31</sup>

Stevenson, History as Myth, p. 1.

two interpretations of the historical function. It is the distinction which Bultmann expounds between objective history (*Historie*) and existential history (*Geschichte*).<sup>32</sup> History (*Historie*) and the historical (*historisch*) refers to the Cartesian or positivist approach of critical research; it is "outer," external history, for it supplies us with only factual information about the world. History as *Geschichte*, on the other hand, is subjective, "inner" history which Bultmann often characterizes as *existentiell*; that is, it refers to the individual understanding of one's own personal existence, and often evokes decision and commitment. R.G. Fuller summarizes it as follows:

By *historisch* Bultmann means that which can be established by the historian's criticism of the past; by *geschichtlich* he means that which, although occurring in past history, has a vital existential reference to our life today.<sup>33</sup>

The proposal of such an existential view of history suggests several things. First is the obvious hypothetical assertion that history is indeed imbued with meaning; that there is not just the bare facts of history, but the potential for their interpretive understanding. (However, it is important here that we maintain the interdependent connection between the facts and the interpretation of history; they are distinguishable, but inseparable.) Secondly, meaning suggests purpose; in this sense, the meaning of historical events is possible only when a purposeful goal, or *telos*, is apparent. Hence we see in our proposal

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Rudolf Bultmann, Existence and Faith (New York: Meridian, 1960), p. 290f.

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Rudolf Bultmann, et al., Kerygma and Myth (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. xii.

above that while history may still be regarded as the events of the past, our historicity is more than passive review; the past is meaningful only to the extent that it informs the present as it fulfills the future. Third, such an existential interpretation of history that offers meaning and purpose requires participation; it demands our response.

It is my intention here to outline the framework for an historical consciousness based upon such an existential interpretation of history. It asserts that history is given meaning by the process of revelation; that purpose is found in its eschatological dimension; and that our only tenable, indeed possible, response is that of faith.

It is obvious, but I will plainly state it, that we have embarked upon a wholly different approach to history than what has preceded it here. Collingwood refers to the rise of a Christian view of history as the great "crisis" effecting European historiography: the optimistic view that man, in his blind and sinful nature, trusts in the gracious acts of a revelatory God with intelligible purpose.<sup>34</sup> Such a view has always been regarded as both the "offense" (the *skandalon*) and the essential nature of the Christian understanding of historical existence. It is the paradoxical assertion of a transcendent God present and active in history that, in Bultmann's words, is the "immunity from proof" demanded by historical (*historisch*) investigations.<sup>35</sup> Such an

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<sup>34</sup>

Collingwood, The Idea of History, pp. 46-47.

<sup>35</sup>

Bultmann, Kerygma and Myth, p. 44.

'offensive' assertion, says Bultmann, "will not be removed by philosophical discussion, but only by faith and obedience."<sup>36</sup>

Consequently the problem of history becomes a theological problem. For Christianity the historical event of Jesus of Nazareth is regarded as absolute divine revelation.

Here the *close connection between Christian revelation and history* comes to light, and here in the final analysis lies the "offense" of the Primitive Christian view of time and history, not only for the historian, but for all "modern" thinking, including theological thinking; the offence is that God reveals himself in a special way and effects "salvation" in a final way within a continuing process.<sup>37</sup>

Greater still is the offense when one considers the claim to universality. As Pannenberg puts it: "The only true test of divinity is in universal history."<sup>38</sup> That is not to say that a theological understanding of history can be translated into world-historical terms; one can maintain a philosophical dualism between so-called sacred and secular histories. Still, from the Christian perspective, there is a unity to history. As Cullmann explains: "This comes from the fact that the Christian absolute norm *is itself also history* and is not, as is the philosophical norm, a transcendent datum that lies beyond history."<sup>39</sup> As a result, the Christian perspective does not regard historical man

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Ibid.

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Oscar Cullmann, Christ and Time (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), p. 23.

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Avery Dulles, Revelation Theology (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), p. 130.

39

Cullmann, Christ and Time, p. 21.

as striving to transcend history; rather he asserts that history has itself been elevated to a transcendent norm. Christianity overcomes the problematic nature of history not by eluding or negating it, but by redeeming it; its whole ontology rests upon its embrace of the tension that results from the dynamic interrelationship of history and transcendence.<sup>40</sup>

How could it be otherwise? As Karl Löwith puts it: "History is meaningful only by indicating some transcendent purpose beyond the actual facts."<sup>41</sup> It is theology and philosophy, and not the science of historical empiricism, that can speak to any sort of ultimate meaning in history.

They (theology and philosophy) signify a fundamental quest; for there would be no search for the meaning of history if its meaning were manifest in historical events. It is the very absence of meaning in the events themselves that motivates the quest.

To ask earnestly the question of the ultimate meaning of history takes one's breath away; it transports us into a vacuum which only hope and faith can fill.<sup>42</sup>

Thus our inquiry reaches the very core of the question of meaning in history; it is the interrelationship of God's action and man's response. It is the dynamics of revelation and faith.

It is appropriate then that John Macquarrie defines revelation as he does. Revelation, he says, takes place in the dynamic process where, "a *quest* for the sense of existence is met by the *gift* of a sense for existence."<sup>43</sup> This fundamental definition contains several

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<sup>40</sup>

Wilburn, The Historical Shape of Faith, pp. 25-26.

<sup>41</sup>

Löwith, Meaning in History, p. 5.

<sup>42</sup>

*Ibid.*, p. 4.



important characteristics. First, it affirms the quest for meaning as an integral part of the revelatory process. It also asserts the basic paradoxical 'offense'; that man's questing is satisfied not by his own efforts, but by God's own self-disclosure. This initiative still rests with God as the existential quest becomes a 'leap' of faith. As Mc-quarrie puts it in the expansion of the definition of revelation:

"Man's faith is made possible by the initiative of that toward which his faith is directed."<sup>44</sup> The question that concerns us here is how, or in what sense, does man experience this initiative from beyond himself?

In so far as it supports and strengthens his existence and helps to overcome its fragmentariness and impotence, he calls the gift that comes to him "grace." In so far as it lays claim on him and exposes the distortions of his existence, it may be called "judgment." In so far as it brings him a new understanding both of himself and of the wider being within which he has his being, then it may be called "revelation."<sup>45</sup>

Such an existential interpretation of revelation is wholly within the tradition of contemporary Christian theology. As Tillich puts it, it is man's existential situation of anxiety and finiteness that gives rise to his concern for ultimate meaning; and it is by the very fact of man's limitations that revelation affirms his inevitable leap of faith whereby the answer to the question of God is given. Hence revelation is the manifestation of what concerns us ultimately.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>

John Mcquarrie, Principles of Christian Theology (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), p. 75.

<sup>44</sup>

Ibid., p. 75

<sup>45</sup>

Ibid.

On man's part the quest for revelation arises out of conflict within actual reason;<sup>47</sup> it is precisely because of this that revelation gives meaning. In the biblical usage of the word, revelation does not mean to impart information *about* God. Rather it refers to "unveiling" the mystery and hiddenness, the innermost nature of God. "Revelation means the disclosure of the hidden ground of all history, the nature and purpose of the living and gracious God."<sup>48</sup> Such an understanding of revelation is applicable to man's disclosing his own innermost nature, his hidden motives and thoughts. Thus it is that God's revelation is said to inform man's ultimate concerns. Not only does it inform our lives, it utilizes them as the principle medium by which God's revelation is made manifest.

Revelation is always mediated. In the stream of events which we shall label "salvation history," men are not blinded with an unveiling of the divine glory, but God comes always veiled in flesh. Historical revelation takes place through history as well as in history. Events and individuals become revelatory of the living God whose hidden purpose is expressed in their lives.<sup>49</sup>

Consequently, while it is God's initiative which we acknowledge as the source of meaning, it is in men's lives -- the faithful response of that acknowledgement -- where we grasp an understanding of that meaning. This is how God acts in history. Further, the concept of meaning in

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<sup>46</sup>

Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967), I, p. 110.

<sup>47</sup>

*Ibid.*, I, p. 83.

<sup>48</sup>

Eric C. Rust, Towards a Theological Understanding of History (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963), p. 64.

<sup>49</sup>

*Ibid.*

revelation is not found in the 'real' events, but in the existential understanding of them. (Such is the position taken by von Rad for the Old Testament,<sup>50</sup> and Bultmann for the New Testament.)<sup>51</sup> The content of revelation, then, is the dimension of depth found within the total realities present to us in experience.<sup>52</sup> In this sense revelation can be seen as transhistorical; for it is not to be regarded so much as an occurrence *within* history, as it is an eschatological event summoning us to the response of faith *through* history.<sup>53</sup>

We can agree with Cullmann that revelatory history is inclusive-ly eschatological and redemptive.<sup>54</sup> Existential or revelatory history (*geschichte*) becomes salvation history (*heilsgeschichte*). It is both purposeful and futuristic, for it reveals the fulfillment of history as a plan of man's salvation from historical existence.

The claim that history has an ultimate meaning implies a final purpose or goal transcending the actual events. ... The temporal horizon for a final goal is, however, an eschatological future, and the future exists for us only by expectation and hope.<sup>55</sup>

This last point raises the subsequent factor involved in this revelatory process: man's response in faith. It is the response to God's initiative in the revelatory quest for meaning. As such it must be regarded not as the blind leap of self-deceptive fools, but as the most creative expression of man's freedom within his historical existence.

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<sup>50</sup>

Dulles, Revelation Theology, p. 123.

<sup>51</sup>

*Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>52</sup>

*Ibid.* 118.

<sup>53</sup>

Tillich, Systematic Theology, I, p. 120.

<sup>54</sup>

Cullmann, Christ and Time, pp. 26-27.

<sup>55</sup>

Löwith, Meaning in History, p. 6.

Man's faith in God assumes transcendent possibilities in all that is finite. This not only emancipates him from the natural laws of scientific history; it releases trans-historical meaning out of the tragedies of history. Such an attitude of faith does not portend to discern either the purpose of God or the historical process itself. Rather it seeks to free man from the oppression of history through revelatory experiences that, while nurtured by history, are detached from and surpass it, thus enabling man to endure it with faithful expectation. This concept of faith *as freedom* is critical to our development of a revelatory view of history in two respects. The first is Eliade's conclusion that, "Only such a freedom ... is able to defend modern man from the terror of history."<sup>56</sup> Secondly, once freed from such terror, man can once again accept his responsibility for, and participate fully in, history. It is the simultaneous recognition of both the historical and revelatory aspects of man's existential situation. "Thus when reality is understood as historical, man is aware of his responsibility for history."<sup>57</sup> Ultimately this awareness can only be regarded as a revelatory gift. Bultmann summarizes as follows: "Everything has been revealed in that man's eyes are opened concerning his own existence, and he is once again able to understand himself."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>

Eliade, Cosmos and History, p. 161.

<sup>57</sup>

Stevenson, History as Myth, p. 27.

<sup>58</sup>

Dulles, Revelation Theology, p. 101.

## B. The Way: Defining a Structure of Existence

We have said that a new historical consciousness emerges when history is perceived as the ontological process of meaning-*full* revelation. It has further been suggested that this process gives rise to a structure in which man's understanding of his existence can be phenomenologically conceived. If the development of our modern historical consciousness is envisaged as the journey in a revelatory quest, then the resulting structure of existence might be regarded as the road we travel. The road, however, is not a static structure; it is existential, not substantial. It is as much a part of the ever-moving dynamic process as the journey itself. Consequently it is important here to clarify what is meant by the term, 'structures of existence', so as to understand the categorical framework we will be using in the chapters that follow.

John Cobb, in his Structure of Christian Existence, provides a<sup>59</sup> useful description of the concept. The term, 'existence', refers to<sup>60</sup> "what a subject is in and for himself in his givenness to himself." This simply refers to man's own existential self-understanding. However, it is essential to recognize the interplay of conscious and unconscious elements within the all-encompassing dimension of what we call man's consciousness; they are regarded as two aspects of a single

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<sup>59</sup>

John B. Cobb, Jr., The Structure of Christian Existence (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), pp. 15-34.

<sup>60</sup>

*Ibid.*, p. 16.

entity.<sup>61</sup> (This interplay will become crucial when we discuss the re-vivification of mythical consciousness.) Within one's own awareness, or conscious experience of his existential situation, Cobb speaks of "occasions of experience" -- units of time events, reflectively perceived in the successive movement of human existence. There is, as well, a diversity of "modes" within each structure of existence, allowing for different possible interpretations of the same basic structure. To understand this phenomenon Cobb suggests an "evolutionary-historical" approach. A structure of existence can change internally<sup>62</sup> due to the mutative effects that the choice of modes has upon it. Or it can provide the basis for the emergence of a new structure.

The new structure arises by the increase or heightening of some new element or elements in the old structure ... The new structure is discontinuous with the old, although the process by which it came into being was continuous.<sup>63</sup>

This emergence of discontinuity within a continuous process Cobb refers to as the "crossing of a threshold."<sup>64</sup> As we will see, it is not unlike the evolutionary-historical approach we will be taking in the next chapter. The decline of the ahistorical structure of primitive existence, and the emergence of the historical structure of biblical existence can be perceived as transhistorical threshold crossings. Yet, at the same time, there are modes of existence within each structure that will lay the foundation for a new, Christian structure of existence. It is to that endeavor we now turn our attention.

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<sup>61</sup>  
Ibid., p. 32

<sup>62</sup>  
Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>63</sup>  
Ibid., pp. 20-21

<sup>64</sup>  
Ibid., p. 21.

## Chapter II

### DIVERGENT FOUNDATIONS:

#### TWO TRADITIONAL VIEWS OF HISTORY

*It seems as if the two great conceptions of antiquity and Christianity, cyclic motion and eschatological direction, have exhausted the basic approaches to the understanding of history. Even the most recent attempts at an interpretation of history are nothing more than variations of these two principles or a mixture of both of them.*

Karl Löwith<sup>1</sup>

Oscar Cullmann, in his standard work, Christ and Time, schematizes the basic distinction that has generally been made between the two views of history we have categorized as structures of existence. It is the contrast between the linear and cyclical conceptions of time and history. The former is biblical history that is revelatory in a temporal dimension, while the latter is Hellenistic, arising out of primitive consciousness, and is spatial in its conception.<sup>2</sup> Cullmann, it seems, cannot over-emphasize the distinction, while others (particularly J. Marsh, The Fulness of Time)<sup>3</sup> consider it a generalization that is exaggerated if not artificial. To say that the Greeks had an exclusively cyclic view of time, while the Hebrews never entertained such a concept, is too clear-cut a distinction to be very useful.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Löwith, Meaning in History (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Oscar Cullmann, Christ and Time (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), p. 51f.

A more helpful framework to use, I would suggest, would be an "evolutionary-historical" approach. If we are trying to differentiate two basic structures of existence, we cannot only categorize them according to their dominant characteristics -- cyclical and spatial, or temporal and historical (as Cullmann does) -- we can delineate, as well, some form of each characteristic within both structures. It is my contention that the notion of historical thinking emerged out of what was a basically cyclical structure of existence, while cyclical motifs continued to complement man's understanding of historical existence. It is, of course, true that the "modalities" change within each structure, and from one structure to the next, in both nature and degree. For instance while there can be traced certain cyclical elements within the Hebrew structure of historical existence, as we will see, the basic conception of time as a linear sequence of events with purposive movement rendered each cyclical gesture to be non-recurrent, non-reversible and unique.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the mythic and ritualistic aspects of cyclicism remained operative.

Based on this type of an approach we will trace the evolutionary development of man's consciousness from what we will call a primitive or archaic structure of existence that is characteristically mythic and (consequently) cyclical, to the historical structure of biblical existence that is rectilinear and eschatological. Both struc-

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<sup>3</sup>  
James Barr, Biblical Words for Time (Naperville, Il.: Allenson, 1962), p. 137.

<sup>4</sup>  
Ibid., p. 140.



tures can be defined as "theocratic," to use Collingwood's phrase. That is, the dynamic process is perceived as divine revelation. The question remains the same: How is meaning revealed to man in his existential quest for it?

#### A. The Cyclical Structure of Primitive/Mythic Existence

All myths are grounded in man's natural and historical environment. Analogically there is a pattern discernible through them all, but each age has its conflicts which demand a new integrating vision ... Myths do have an abiding insight into ultimate realities and thus may have a continuing usefulness for the understanding of all history.<sup>5</sup>

The cyclic pattern, as a structure of existence, emerged among primitive societies as the result of an ontology based upon a mythical consciousness. Cobb refers to this form of consciousness as "reflective consciousness," and characterizes it as primitive man's ability to symbolically order his experiences.

By the use of symbols, consciousness could order and fill with meaning far larger portions of what it received. It could relate this to a context that included both past and future. It could preserve its achievements through symbolized memory and thus gain a new possibility of cumulative growth.<sup>6</sup>

Already then, with the cognitive awareness of a past and future to the meaning of human activity, a form of history was emerging. But this symbolic representation of man's existence was of a peculiar kind; it was totally mythic, naturalistic, subjective, and non-rational.

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Eric C. Rust, Towards a Theological Understanding of History (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1963), p. 89.

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John B. Cobb, Jr., The Structure of Christian Existence (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), p. 41.

For primitive man there existed a basic harmony between his ontology and cosmology. (It is the "cosmological conviction" Loew<sup>7</sup> refers to in his book, Myth, Sacred History, and Philosophy.) Natural phenomena were only understood in terms of human experience; and that human experience was conceived in terms of cosmic events. The result was a form of consciousness that was wholly relational with the phenomenal world.

Primitive man has only one mode of thought, one mode of expression, one part of speech -- the personal. This does not mean ... that primitive man, in order to explain natural phenomena, imparts human characteristics to an inanimate world. Primitive man simply does not know an inanimate world.<sup>8</sup>

The external world is not the object of detached speculation; rather it is the dynamic totality of the life itself in which primitive man is immersed. Thoughts, feelings, and actions are indistinguishable aspects of experience. As Henri Frankfort, in his book, Before Philosophy, puts it: "The whole man confronts a living 'Thou' in nature; and the whole man -- emotional and imaginative as well as intellectual<sup>9</sup> -- gives expression to the experience."

Such expression took the form of a narrative, the account of man's interaction with the phenomenal world. Primitive man told myths, not as a fanciful indulgence or intelligible explanation of nature,

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Cornelius Loew, Myth, Sacred History and Philosophy (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967), p. 13f.

8

Henri Frankfort, Before Philosophy (London: Penguin Books, 1949), p. 14.

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Ibid., p. 14

but as an expression of the meaning of his very existence. Thus mythical consciousness *was* historical consciousness in its most basic form -- i.e., man's search for self-understanding. Not only could one conceive of mythic existence as history, but as *revelatory* history.

True myth presents its images and its imaginary actors, not with the playfulness of fantasy, but with a compelling authority. It perpetuates the revelation of a 'Thou' ... The imagery ... is nothing less than a carefully chosen cloak for abstract thought, and is inseparable from it. It represents the form in which the experience has become conscious.<sup>10</sup>

Mythic consciousness, therefore, is the symbolic ordering of experience where meaning is revealed in the interrelationship of man with the divine in nature. By its symbolic nature myth is both metaphysical and paradoxical. It imbues external objects with transcendent meaning, while at the same time maintains their finite nature. "It is concrete, though it claims to be unassailable in its validity. It claims recognition by the faithful; it does not pretend to justification before the critical."<sup>11</sup>

The compelling validity of myth was manifested not merely in the informative conveyance of cosmic experiences, but in the recounting of those myths through ritualistic dramatizations. Myth, as Frankfort describes it, is the emergence of poetry (transcendence) that continually expresses meaning for existence in a never-ending recital.

Myth is a form of poetry which transcends poetry in that it proclaims a truth; a form of reasoning which transcends reasoning in that it wants to bring about the truth it proclaims; a form of action, of ritual behavior, which does not find its fulfillment in the act but must proclaim and elaborate a poetic form of truth.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>

Ibid., p. 15

<sup>11</sup>

Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>12</sup>

Ibid., p. 16.

Primitive consciousness is mythopoeic in the repetition of its ritualistic expression as a *circle of transcendence*. In Myth and Reality, Eliade plainly states that the foremost function of myth is, "to reveal the exemplary models for all human rites and all significant human activities."<sup>13</sup> This leads to a "sacred history" that is essentially cyclical in structure; it is a history of "the Cosmos and of human society ... preserved and transmitted through myths."<sup>14</sup>

To understand this further we can return to the idea of reflective consciousness (ontologically and cosmologically) as the symbolic ordering of experience. In Cosmos and History: The Myth of Eternal Return, Eliade writes:

Neither the objects of the external world nor human acts, have any autonomous intrinsic value. Objects or acts acquire a value, and in so doing become real, because they participate in a reality that transcends them.<sup>15</sup>

Primitive man recognizes the full reality of his existential situation; he is less than himself, threatened by non-being, by chaos, by meaninglessness. Consequently he strives for a reality that is eternal, imperishable. And the only manner in which he can participate in such reality is in the faithful repetition of the primordial acts of the Gods by which the cosmos (including his own life) came into being.

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<sup>13</sup>

Mircea Eliade, Myth and Reality (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 8.

<sup>14</sup>

Mircea Eliade, Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), p. viii.

<sup>15</sup>

Ibid., pp. 3-4.

Archaic man acknowledges no act which has not been previously posited and lived by someone else ... What he does has been done before. His life is the ceaseless repetition of gestures initiated by others. The gesture acquires meaning, reality, solely to the extent to which it repeats a primordial act.<sup>16</sup>

This repetition of a primordial act, then, is not simply a recounting of the creation of the cosmos; it is how man hopes to transcend his own limitations and return to the state of primordial Oneness. Man cannot help but participate in the natural life-cycles of birth, death and rebirth. Further he knows that his life (indeed the entire cosmos) depends on the perpetual renewal of Cosmic Life. The annual rituals such as the festivals of the New Year and the Epic of Creation in the Ancient Near Eastern cultures guaranteed the periodic regeneration of life.<sup>17</sup> This regeneration of life also meant the periodic regeneration of time which presupposed, in the "historical" civilizations, a "new Creation, that is, a repetition of the cosmogonic act."<sup>18</sup> The periodic ceremony of every New Year, with the annual expulsion of sins, diseases, and demons, is an attempt to restore -- if only momentarily -- "mythical and primordial time, 'pure' time, the time of the instant of Creation."<sup>19</sup> This ritual repetition of the mythical moment as the passage from chaos to cosmos represents the timeless image of Paradise. Hence what primitive man strived for was the "abolition of history," -- that is, a history that is temporal and finite.<sup>20</sup>

Primitive man had difficulty with the concept of history for

<sup>16</sup>  
Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>17</sup>  
Ibid., p. 51f.

<sup>18</sup>  
Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>19</sup>  
Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>20</sup>  
Ibid., p. 53.

it confronted him with the terrifying unknown wrought by unintelligible changes in life. The visible, external world afforded a sense of order only to the extent that it represented the invisible powers which controlled the ever-immanent chaos. Man's creative freedom was thus limited to those ritualistic expressions of what was pre-ordained, taking the form of those origin myths. As Rust says, "Myth expresses man's dependence on the powers in nature and his belief that such dependence frees him from the known powers of the visible order."<sup>21</sup> However, as Eliade argues, with the perpetuation of time, primitive man's ontology gives place to history as an evolutionary process in mythical time continues.

A mythical Time is still involved, but it is no longer the 'first' Time, what we may call the 'cosmogonic' Time. The 'essential' is no longer bound up with an *ontology* (how the World came into being) but with a *History*.<sup>22</sup>

This sense of 'historical' development was evolutionary, having its roots within the cosmological structure of primitive man. The mythical moment, as history, is possible because of the ever-changing "modality" of the divine beings who are below the immortal Creator Gods, but still rule over the descendants of man's mythical ancestors. These divine beings are subject to changes; they die, though they do not perish, but survive in their creations. Created man joins in "communion" with such demi-gods. Out of such communion arises a stronger sense of historical existence.

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<sup>21</sup>

Rust, Towards a Theological Understanding of History, p. 83.

<sup>22</sup>

Eliade, Myth and Reality, p. 108.

The accent is now on what *happened* to the gods and no longer on what they *created*. To be sure, there is always a more or less clearly 'creative' aspect in every divine adventure -- but what appears more and more important is no longer the *result* of the adventure but the *sequence of dramatic events* that constitute it.<sup>23</sup>

Such an 'historical' development in man's reflective consciousness took two divergent trends. One was the rise of a Greek philosophy of history; the other was the emergence of the Hebrew understanding of revelatory history. Though they can be differentiated they are types within one basic structure of existence that emerged out of primitive existence; it is what Cobb terms "axial" existence. This new structure began with the rationalization of reflective consciousness first begun among "civilized" structures of existence.<sup>24</sup> This was a wholly compatible idea within the evolutionary schema. As Cobb says, "The reflective consciousness is necessarily symbolic, primordially mythical, but incipiently rational."<sup>25</sup> The rise of rational thinking represented a new threshold crossing within the continuous process of psychic growth.

The process of such thinking is initially and primarily unconscious, yet it differs profoundly from mythical thinking. It conforms, for example, albeit unconsciously, to the principle of noncontradiction, whereas contradictions disturb the mythical mentality but little.<sup>26</sup>

This is the process Eliade describes as the "beginnings of demythicization," where the primordial situation that preceded the mythological

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23

Ibid., p. 110.

24

Cobb, The Structure of Christian Existence, p. 52f.

25

Ibid., p. 49.

26

Ibid., p. 47.

history of the Gods is sought as "the womb of Being."<sup>27</sup> This new mode of reflective consciousness constituted the rise of speculative thought, the emergence of philosophy, the systematic attempt to identify and understand the *absolute beginnings*.

It was in seeking the source, the principle, the *arche*, that philosophical speculation for a short time coincided with cosmogony; but it was no longer the cosmogonic myth, it was an ontological problem.<sup>28</sup>

This is Cobb's threshold crossing into "axial existence," where rationality achieved a "dominant seat of existence" in man's reflective consciousness.<sup>29</sup> Still even from the perspective of this new structure of rational consciousness, when the philosophical question is posed as to the 'nature of things', man inevitably returns to those original representations out of which mythology had first taken form. For example, for a Greek such as Herodotus, the law of time remained cyclical and non-eschatological, though comprehended in a new way. As F.M. Cornford wrote, in his preface to the book, From Religion to Philosophy,

If we now call it 'metaphysical,' instead of 'supernatural,' the thing itself has not essentially changed its character. What has changed is, rather, man's attitude towards it, which, from being active and emotional, has become intellectual and speculative.<sup>30</sup>

The implications of this change in attitude produced a new concept of freedom and individuality for axial man. Primitive man understood himself as a participant in a role in a cosmic drama, rather than an indi-

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<sup>27</sup>

Eliade, Myth and Reality, p. 111.

<sup>28</sup>

*Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>29</sup>

Cobb, Structure of Christian Existence, pp. 52-54.

<sup>30</sup>

F.M. Cornford, From Religion to Philosophy (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), p. ix.



vidual whose thoughts and actions had determinative effects on the world in which he is a part. With the rationalization of reflective consciousness there appeared in man the "conscious control of symboli-<sup>31</sup> zation and thereby, also of action." Man could relate to the world and the Divine in a new way. It is in the historical consciousness of Hebrew man that this is most compellingly and uniquely realized.

#### B. The Linear Structure of Hebrew/Biblical Existence

*A new mythological structure is offered which, while it has similarity to the old, yet stands in contrast to it and thus creates tensions which challenge man to advance and so transform history.*<sup>32</sup>

The fundamental assumption among peoples throughout the Ancient Near East had been that the individual was part of a society that was embedded in nature; and that nature was the manifestation of divine beings who were the archetypes of the regenerative life-cycle. The monotheism of Hebrew thought not only rid itself of demi-gods, it retained the predominance of the one Supreme Being and Creator God, and asserted his absolute transcendence as well. Yahweh was not to be found in nature, nor were objects and cycles of nature infused with divine beings. Nature and man were considered valueless before Ultimate Value. All natural phenomena were manifestations of the God of Moses who could not even be named: "And God said to Moses: 'I AM WHO I AM.'" (Ex.3:14) The graven image was denounced, for that which was

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<sup>31</sup>

Cobb, The Structure of Christian Existence, p. 57.

<sup>32</sup>

Rust, Towards a Theological Understanding of History, p. 90.

boundless could not be given form or even uttered upon men's lips.

"Every finite reality shrivelled to nothingness Before the absolute value which was God."<sup>33</sup> The radicalism of Hebrew monotheism is summed up by Frankfort as an existential confession of faith.

Only a God who transcends every phenomenon, who is not conditioned by any mode of manifestation -- only an unqualified God can be the one and only ground of *all* existence.<sup>34</sup>

Have we left the realm of mythopoeic man behind? Hardly! For in this process of what might be called the 'supreme abstraction of the Divine' the transcendent God is not conceived as the idea of detached speculation, but perceived in a passionate and dynamic encounter. Hebrew thought did not negate mythopoeic thought, but rather created a new myth -- what Frankfort calls the "myth of the Will of God."<sup>35</sup> It is a dynamic myth of the transcendent God acting in history in relationship with man.

Although the great 'Thou' which confronted the Hebrews transcended nature, it stood in a specific relationship to the people.

Not cosmic phenomena, but history itself, becomes pregnant with meaning; history becomes a revelation of the dynamic will of God.<sup>36</sup>

Hebrew man regarded himself as the mediation of God's revelation in history; he was the servant of God and the interpreter of His Will. Further, the God who acts in history is not just the primordial God of Creation; He is the Judge of history at the End of the World.<sup>37</sup> For

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<sup>33</sup> Frankfort, Before Philosophy, p. 242.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 244.

<sup>37</sup> Eliade, Myth and Reality, p. 65.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 243.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 244-245.

Hebrew man this end comes only once; and time is no longer conceived as cyclical like the Myth of the Eternal Return, but is now understood as linear and irreversible. History becomes eschatological in the dynamic process of God's revelation and man's faithful response -- a movement of purpose and progression from Creation and Fall to final Redemption. Yet within this new structure of historical existence there remains mythic and even cyclical modes that are essential parts of the meaningful whole of biblical existence. Here we can only briefly look at those which are most prominent: 1) The covenantal relationship of promise and fulfillment as established with the Exodus. 2) The continued revelation and interpretation of God's Will in prophetic existence. And 3) The faithful response of Israel to God's revelation in its ritual worship.

1. The Covenant: Promise and Fulfillment. The whole history of Israel is the dynamic covenantal process of promise and fulfillment -- God's revelatory acts in the world of man and nature. There are, however, several things we must recognize at the outset. The first is that all speaking of God as the transcendent mystery is necessarily symbolic and mythical language. Consequently when we speak of God acting in history we are speaking of man engaging the Myth of Ultimate Reality. As Rust observes,

We cannot speak of the inner meaning of history, of its divine ground or possibility or of the inner nature and freedom of historical man without using symbolic language. Myth unveils the depth of historical reality ...<sup>38</sup>

Secondly, the distinctiveness of the Hebrew concept of God acting in history is questionable, to some extent, within its own cultural background. (For a further discussion of this point see James Barr, Old & New in Interpretation,<sup>39</sup> especially pages 72f.) Third, we have the wisdom material which, while it can loosely still be considered part of a revelatory history, does not impart a primary importance to any series of historical events, nor considers them the sole approach to a knowledge of God. There are expressions of a permanence and eternity to nature as God's own manifestation. "What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; and there is nothing new under the sun." "For everything there is a season." (Eccl.1:9,3:1) The cyclical rhythms of nature are first established at the Creation: "While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease." (Gen.8:22) Still the historical consciousness of Hebrew man was unmistakably wrapped up in the idea of God's self-disclosure in *human* affairs.

For Hebrew man the climactic act of God in history is a concrete and decisive moment, in a particular time, and involving a particular people. It is the establishment of a covenant that occurs with the Exodus event. In Sinai, God said, "If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples." (Ex.19:5) Of such a moment Frankfort writes,

It is a poignant myth, this Hebrew myth of a chosen people, of a divine promise made, of a terrifying moral burden imposed — a

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James Barr, Old and New in Interpretation (London: SCM Press, 1966), p. 72f.

prelude to the later myth of the Kingdom of God, and that more remote and more spiritual 'promised land.'<sup>40</sup>

The Old Testament idea of a covenant required an historical consciousness that afforded man the freedom to live responsibly in relation to God; this constituted the emergence of a religious consciousness that was the basis of salvation history. Its development can be seen in the process of promise and fulfillment in regards to the Hebrew understanding of time.

In the Old Testament time was not an abstract notion; it was<sup>41</sup> inseparable from temporal events. The covenant promise is given to Israel in the Exodus at a particular point in time; but the point does not end with the passage of time. The Exodus event does not remain in the past, but asserts itself in the present 'Now' of all time. As von Rad says, "The historical acts by which Jahweh founded the community of Israel were absolute. They did not share the fate of all other events, which inevitably slip back into the past. They were actual for each generation that followed."<sup>42</sup> In a sense, time is conceived as the past encompassed in the present moving towards the future.

Thus in Israel all history is a movement between promise and fulfillment. What God promises he fulfills, and, because the fulfillment is only partial, it contains within it an unfulfilled promise that points forward to a new fulfillment.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>

Frankfort, Before Philosophy, p. 244

<sup>41</sup>

Gerhard von Rad, Old Testament Theology (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), II, 100.

<sup>42</sup>

*Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>43</sup>

James D. Smart, The Interpretation of Scripture (London: SCM Press, 1961), p. 102.

In another sense however, the supreme revelatory act of God in history is the *end* of history. The covenantal bond between Yahweh and his people established an everlasting promise that is the culmination of all that comes before or after it. For the Hebrew, history begins with the Creation and runs through the revelation to Abraham, and to Moses and the proclamation of the Law. There is the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, the deliverance of God's people into the *promised* land. As Ludwig Köhler asks: What then?

The promises go no further. The land of Canaan is from now on Israel's "everlasting possession" (Gen.17:8). The people of Israel live there under the "everlasting covenant" (Gen.17:7) with God. They are his people; he is their God (Ex.6:7). Neither in space nor time can there be anything else or anything new.<sup>44</sup>

Have we then arrived at the End, with the end of history? Certainly not. Yet the Hebrew world view contained no outlook into a future in time. Israel saw itself as, "the community of God, in the world but not of the world, in time but not of time."<sup>45</sup> What of the eschatological future in the redemptive process of promise and fulfillment within a linear history? The future, as von Rad reluctantly uses the term, is to be understood solely as, "an extension of the present."<sup>46</sup> The eschatological fulfillment of history is the progressive completion of what has already come to pass. What is the nature, then, of Israel's

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<sup>44</sup>  
Ludwig Köhler, Hebrew Man (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), p. 122.

<sup>45</sup>  
Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>46</sup>  
Rad, Old Testament Theology, II, 102.

'history'? Is it really a linear conception? How does Yahweh continue to actively reveal himself? And what is man's appropriate response?

2. Prophetic Existence. The exodus is a journey that continues still, re-enacting the covenantal myth of promise and fulfillment. Israel is a nation whose roots are nomadic, for it embraces the burden as well as the promise of the New Age, at the sacrifice of a harmonious existence within the natural world.<sup>47</sup> It knows that, though the source of Holiness is beyond the cosmos, it finds its *expression* in human history.<sup>48</sup> Israel does not find the symbolic image of the Holy in nature, but experiences the acts of God in man himself. God mediates his revelation through men, and expects man to respond. As Frankfort puts it: "Man confronting God will not contemplate him, but will hear his voice and command."<sup>49</sup> The call and reception of revelation resulted most clearly in the development of the prophetic tradition of Israel, where man was called into account for his freedom and responsibility before God.

In von Rad's book, the prophetic vision has been described as "the renewing act of the historical drama."<sup>50</sup> Time and again the prophets call the nation of Israel to return, to go back to the everlasting

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<sup>47</sup>

See footnote G. Ernest Wright, God Who Acts (London: SCM Press, 1952), p. 118.

<sup>48</sup>

Loew, Myth, Sacred History and Philosophy, p. 146.

<sup>49</sup>

Frankfort, Before Philosophy, p. 247.

<sup>50</sup>

Rad, Old Testament Theology, II, 116.

ing covenant once made. Thus it is that the Exodus tradition is so prominent in Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Deutero-Isaiah. Is this the eschatological "extension of the present?" Not quite; for at the same time the saving efficacy of the past is lost to the reality of the future because of Israel's present guilts in each successive age. A new historical act is required by Yahweh. Yet, as von Rad observes, "the new is to be effected in a way which is more or less analogous to God's former saving work."<sup>51</sup>

Thus Hosea foretells a new entry into the land, Isaiah a new David and a new Zion, Jeremiah a new covenant, and Deutero-Isaiah a new Exodus ... For Isaiah the old saving acts and institutions are still valid enough to allow Jahweh to link his coming to them.<sup>52</sup>

Prophecy calls man to return to a past being fulfilled anew; for what happened with the Exodus is not a "once" but a "now." It is "we ourselves" who have been brought out of Egypt. (Ex.13:16) As Köhler says, "Past and present are one single act of God delivering his people."<sup>53</sup> It beckons the exiled Israel to journey the "pilgrim way," the "Way of Holiness." As Isaiah proclaims: "By it those He has ransomed shall return, and the Lord's redeemed come home." (Is.35:9-10)

On the one hand, this covenanting action between God and man in history is a cyclical reality of promise and fulfillment; on the other hand, it points beyond itself to the full actualization of what is already partially realized. It is with this dual interpretation

51

Ibid., p. 117.

52

Ibid.

53

Köhler, Hebrew Man, p. 119.



that we can also understand the nature of Israel's worshipful response to God's revelatory acts.

3. Tradition and Worship. Köhler writes: "Israel's only duty, the only reason for its existence, is the right worship of God, as it ought to have been observed from the fathers onward. This is the supreme expression of the power of tradition over the spirit of the Hebrew."<sup>54</sup> As in any culture the adherence to tradition is a strong cyclical motif, where an action of the past is repeated with existential significance for each succeeding generation. The ordering of everyday life, as well as the proper observances of festal occasions, gave a certain "rhythm" to time.<sup>55</sup> "The rhythm of Israel's great festivals was originally determined by nature's ordering of the Palestinian year."<sup>56</sup> Israel made full use of the cosmic renewal rites of the Ancient Near East.<sup>57</sup> It was not simply order in his natural environment, however, that Hebrew man sought; it was, as well, the subsequent re-enactment of a disclosive experience within the community of Israel, what Macquarrie calls "repetitive revelation."<sup>58</sup> This repetition of a "primordial" or "classic" revelation (again, Mcquarrie's designations) is significant in two respects. First it can be said that the ritual

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<sup>54</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

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<sup>55</sup> Rad, Old Testament Theology, II, 102.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., II, 103.

<sup>57</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Loew, Myth, Sacred History and Philosophy, p. 111.

<sup>58</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Avery Dulles, Revelation Theology (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), p. 119.

as imitation, transcends time -- time as Hebrew man understood it.

Second, it is an act of faithful worship. For Israel it is what Wright calls, "the confessional recital of the gracious and redemptive acts of God."<sup>60</sup>

The Passover is the archetypal rite for Israel.<sup>61</sup> It re-enacts the supreme revelation of God in history; it is the dutiful response, a recital of faith. It is always and everywhere God's saving action, not simply acknowledged but zealously *lived*.

And it shall be to you as a sign on your hand and as a memorial between your eyes, that the law of the Lord may be in your mouth; for with a strong hand the Lord has brought you out of Egypt. You shall therefore keep this ordinance at its appointed time from year to year. (Ex.13:9-10)

The repetitive celebration of the Passover is a cyclical mode in the biblical structure of existence; but in a new and qualified sense. It expresses a time that is both in and beyond history; but in the eschatological "extension" of the past in each new age. This is not unlike the dualistic interpretation of later Jewish apocalyptic literature referring to the two Ages of the world: the present corruptible Age in

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<sup>59</sup>

S.G.F. Brandon, History, Time and Deity (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1965), p. 30.

<sup>60</sup>

Wright, God Who Acts, p. 120.

<sup>61</sup>

It is interesting to note that Hans-Joachim Kraus, Worship in Israel (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965), points out that the Passover rite had its origins as a pilgrimage feast from a semi-nomadic culture, while the Feast of Unleavened Bread had its roots in annual agricultural festivals. Both are found in cultic calendars as springtime rites emerging out of common traditions in Ancient Near Eastern cultures. See especially pages 45f.

which man is incapable of saving himself; and the fulfilling promise of God's redemptive intervention described in the images of the New Age.<sup>62</sup>

The language of the Passover celebration, too, is a recital that is both cyclical and mythopoeic; yet it expresses a new freedom and responsibility in man in his personal direct encounter with the Absolute. Thus the historical consciousness of Hebrew man must be seen as the result of an evolutionary development in the progressive emergence of a structure based on man's ever-present, revelatory quest for meaning in and beyond his own existence.

### C. Summary

We have seen that primitive existence was cyclic and mythic. It was based upon the changing seasons of nature, ordered in the primordial act of Creation, and to which human life integrated itself through imitation of the cyclical pattern. The expressions of its cultic activity was the mythopoeic recital of divine revelations in nature. Primitive man's quest for a sense of existence was given purpose in the perpetual renewal of all things. In contrast the structure of existence that emerged in Israel was quite different.

Israel was little interested in nature, except as God used it together with his historical acts to reveal himself and to accomplish his purpose. Yahweh was the God of history, the living God unaffected by the cycles of nature, who had set himself to accomplish a definite purpose in time.<sup>63</sup>

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62

Rudolf Bultmann, et al., Kerygma and Myth (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), pp. 15-16.

As a result the cultic expressions of Israel were a recital of the history of God's acts of revelation in and through his people; they were confessions of faith, praise, and repentance in an eschatological dimension of fulfillment of time in the future, and not a return to the primordial and timeless past.

The story of the past was the guide to the present and the key to the future. Both beginning and end, creation and eschatology, therefore, became an integral part of the Israelite view of time.<sup>64</sup>

Cullmann claims, "There can be no real reconciliation when the fundamental positions are so radically different."<sup>65</sup> Yet we cannot fail to realize the inherent modalities of cyclicism and myth in Israel's structure of existence. It is not simply a linear conception of history, any more than primitive existence was without a 'history'. Wright has said that Israel's "sense of a movement of history toward a future goal, in which the promises of past and the hopes of the present find their fulfillment, is the source of our modern conception of history in the Western world."<sup>66</sup> If this is true we must take account of both its cyclical and linear modes as we turn to consider its evolutionary-historical implications for the threshold we cross when we enter into the new structure we call Christian existence.

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<sup>63</sup>

G. Ernest Wright, The Old Testament Against Its Environment (Chicago: Regnery, 1950), p. 71.

<sup>64</sup>

Ibid.

<sup>65</sup>

Cullmann, Christ and Time, p. 58.

<sup>66</sup>

Wright, The Old Testament Against Its Environment, pp. 71-72.

## Chapter III

## SYNTHESIS:

A THEORY OF CYCLICAL EXPANSION  
AS A STRUCTURE OF CHRISTIAN EXISTENCE

*Is the ultimate standard and pattern of our existence the classical view of the world as an eternal cosmos, revolving in periodic cycles, or is it the Christian view of the world as a unique creation out of nothing, called forth by the omnipotence of a non-natural God? Is the ultimate being a divine cosmos, recurrent like a circle in itself, or a personal God, revealing himself not primarily in nature but in and to humanity under the sign of the cross?*<sup>1</sup>

Karl Löwith

A. Introduction: Crossing-Over the New Threshold

In what sense can the rise of Christianity, as a structure of existence, be considered the evolutionary and historical outcome of the former two structures we have outlined? What are the "discontinuities" within the "continuing process" that validly constitute the crossing-over of a new threshold into an existence that fulfills and transcends the previous historical structures? Bultmann has described the emergence of primitive Christianity as a "syncretistic phenomenon" reconciling juxtaposing -- if not antithetical -- viewpoints.<sup>2</sup> From such a perspective we must first look at what the archetypal questing

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Löwith, Meaning in History (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 215.

<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, Primitive Christianity in Its Contemporary Setting (New York: World, 1956), p. 175.

man brings with him to this new threshold of existence.

Christianity's "organic rootage" in Judaism is an obvious reality, both in terms of its structural pattern and its prevenient essence.<sup>3</sup> Christianity emerged out of that continuous process we have called a revelatory view of history; but its discontinuity and break with its precedent lay with its new and distinct understanding of revelation. The Covenant of Israel was the revelation of a God acting in history, and mediated through men; the model was the Exodus, described by Buber as a "journey ... into being."<sup>4</sup> With the *full* expression of God's revelatory action in the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth a new relationship is initiated. Only *once* God enters so completely into history that a New Covenant is established -- permanently. So unique is this revelation in history that Christ becomes the mediator of the entire process. "God no longer speaks to men through history but through Christ, who is the end of history, and through the Word which proclaims him."<sup>5</sup> Thus the prophetic tradition of Israel is replaced by the gospel writers who proclaim the revelation of the *Logos*. God's Word is revealed as the ultimate and culminating act of history. As the prologue of John's gospel says, "the Word became Flesh." (John 1:14) The ramifications of Christ as mediator do not stop here; the

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<sup>3</sup> Ralph G. Wilburn, The Historical Shape of Faith (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> W. Taylor Stevenson, History as Myth (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> Bultmann, Primitive Christianity, p. 187.

implications of the entire revelatory process encompasses the cosmic as well as the historical. "Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." (I Cor. 8:6) Whereas Judaism had sought revelation solely through a God of history, the God of the New Covenant reconciles all creatures through Christ. (Col.1:19) As Cullmann observes: "The solidarity between man<sup>6</sup> and creation is now no longer manifested merely in primitive myth." Just as history can only be transcended by its fulfillment, the New Creation can only come to fruition through the transformation of what has been created. So what we have is an eschatological covenant that is removed from empirical history enabling creation and redemption to emerge as a single revelatory process.

Like Judaism, primitive Christianity affirmed a belief in a providential design to the course of history; however, unlike Judaism it conceived of history as being not particularistic, but universal. God's revelation in Christ was, at once, the disclosure of existential meaning for all men. Further, Christian man is as much a cosmic being determined by cosmic forces as he is an individual with the freedom of his will.<sup>7</sup> Yet anthropologically, whereas his Greek counterpart despairs at the failure of reason to direct his will, and Old Testament

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<sup>6</sup>  
Oscar Cullmann, Christ and Time (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), p. 102.

<sup>7</sup>  
Rudolf Bultmann, et al., Kerygma and Myth (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), pp. 11-12.

man assumes responsibility for fulfilling covenantal law, New Testament man professes his total impotence to will the good. "What is needed is to bring home to the will its utter impotence; so that it can cry: 'Oh wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?'"<sup>8</sup> Thus the covenant with Christ becomes a "journey into being," the New Israel, where man's quest for existential meaning is an act of repentance met by the gift of prevenient Grace in God's initiatory action.

The decisive revelatory act of God in Christ has profound implications for the understanding of time and progress. For primitive man historical time began with creation, and reverted back to it in a cyclical structure. The Jews, too, reckoned time from a beginning, but were futuristic because of an eschatological dimension to their history. For the Christian, time is viewed from its point of fulfillment which is centralized, and encompasses past and future (including the old covenant). Christ is the New Covenant, and the eschatological future is now the "extension" of the Christ event. Consequently, whereas eternity for primitive man was conceived of as primordial timelessness, eternity for the Christian becomes endless time, joyfully embraced as the continual actualization of the ultimate redemption already realized.

This process has still traditionally been regarded as 'historical', that is, linear.

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<sup>8</sup>  
Bultmann, Primitive Christianity, p. 181.

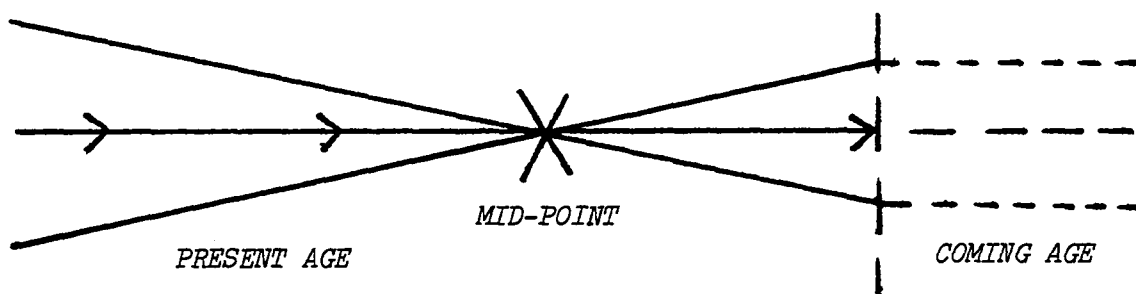


In this linear, though double-faced, chronological scheme the biblical view of history is delineated as a history of salvation, progressing from promise to fulfillment and focused in Jesus Christ.

In this linear, but centered, movement a progressive condensation and reduction takes place, culminating in the single representative figure of Christ, to be followed by a progressive expansion of the central event into a world-wide community of believers.<sup>9</sup>

Collingwood provides a similar construction for Christian historiography, making the Christ event as the mid-point dividing a "backward-looking past" revelation from a "blind," but "forward-looking" historical expectation. Such a division of two periods he calls *apocalyptic* history, and proceeds to delineate further sub-divisions by pointing out the epochal characteristic of Christianity.<sup>10</sup>

Cullmann, basing his argument primarily on Paul's historical survey in Romans 9-11 & 5:12f., constructs his own *Heilsplan*, his "historical economy of salvation." It could be likened to a *funnel/funnel-reverse* process. Based on the simple diagram he provides in Christ and Time, we can further schematize his plan as follows:



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Löwith, Meaning in History, p. 182.

10

R.G. Collingwood, The Idea of History (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1956), p. 50.

Thus the history of salvation up to Christ develops as a progressive reduction: mankind (Adam) — the people of Israel — the remnant of Israel — the One, Christ (Second Adam). Thus indeed has the history of salvation arrived at its center, but it has not yet run its complete course. Now it becomes necessary, in a manner of speaking, to reverse the process, namely, to proceed from the One to the Many, but in such a way that *the Many represent the One*.

Thus the history of salvation runs its course in two movements. The first runs from the Many to the One. This is the old covenant. The other runs from the One to the Many. This is the New Covenant. Precisely in the middle is the decisive *factum*, the death of Christ.<sup>11</sup>

To put it plainly Cullmann's model is a self-limiting proposition. It seems based upon the typical historicistic position that distinguishes *Heilsgeschichte* from *historie*, while remaining confined to the same structural format for both. For Cullmann history is the successive movement of purposive events in a time-shaped pattern. How one interprets those events is what distinguishes 'sacred' history from 'secular' profane history. Cullmann is still maintaining that the difference between the two basic structures of existence render them incompatible. The historical structure of the New Testament, he insists, is temporal and linear. Yet it is interesting that Cullmann himself acknowledges the limitations of such a structure from the most primitive beginnings of Christianity itself, when the delay of the Parousia<sup>12</sup> lead to a collapse of eschatological realization. Further, Cullmann's own description of the eschatological fulfillment of history as an expansion of the mid-point ("from the One to the Many, but in such a way that *the many represent the One*") would appear to be more spa-

<sup>11</sup> Cullmann, Christ and Time, p. 83.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

tially, than temporally, oriented. It is not time-shaped movement away from the mid-point of history toward a new point, the Parousia, and the New Age of which we are speaking. Rather, I would contend, it is an interim period -- a period of tension and paradox -- that is both temporal and spatial. It is the constant return to the "once-for-all" event, a fixed and limitless point in time, that fulfills and transcends time in a *cyclical* pattern that is *self-expanding*.

### B. Cyclical Expansion: The Model

*In this theological perspective the pattern of history is a movement progressing, and at the same time returning, from alienation to reconciliation, one great detour to reach in the end the beginning through ever repeated acts of rebellion and self-surrender.*

13

Karl Löwith

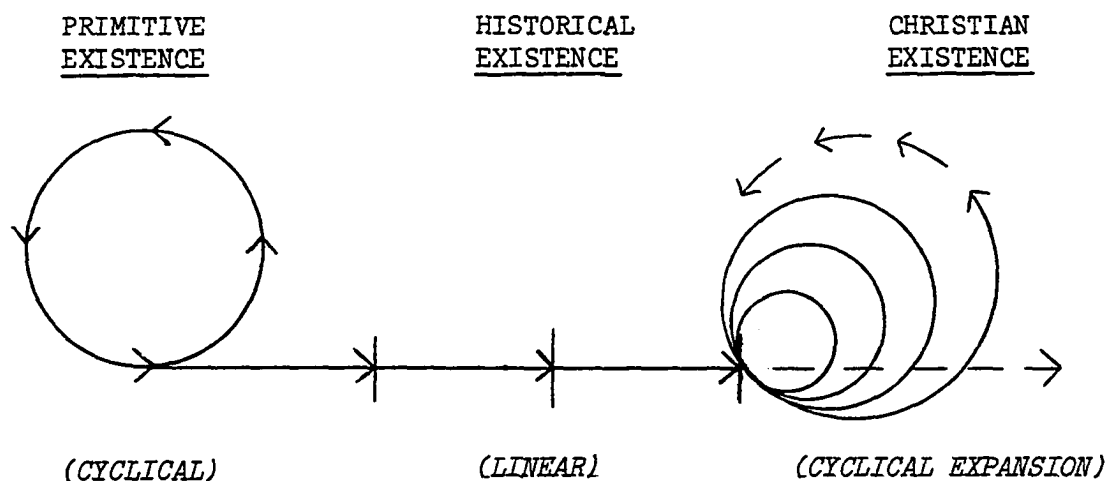
From its inception the primitive Christian community was confronted with a unique understanding of historical *necessity*. For the interpreted act of God in the historical figure of Jesus ended one revelatory view of history as it began another, in the emergence of a Christ-centered faith. The post-resurrection community of the faithful followers of Jesus understood the culmination of their covenantal history to be the once-for-all Christ event. The redeeming act of God, *par excellence*, had happened. Now the question arose again, but in a new light: How does God continue to act in History?

For the archetypal questing man who has left the cyclical repetition of primitive existence, and passed through the terror of his-

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Löwith, Meaning in History, p. 13.

torical existence, there is a structure for revelatory existence based upon a faith that frees man by virtue of God's limitlessness, and gives transhistorical meaning out of the tragedies of history. It is a structure that incorporates characteristics of both primitive and historical existence; yet its cyclicism supercedes mere repetition, and transcends linear progression by the nature of its characteristic of expansion.



Diagrammatically we can construct the development of the two former structures of existence, and the new proposed structure of cyclical expansion. The repetitious cycle of mythic existence is seen as giving way to the progressive linear historical existence until the point for Christian existence occurs. That point is the Christ event, and represents, initially, the overcoming of both previous structures. It is neither exclusively spatial or completely temporal, but rather both in a new sense; this affords man the benefits of both former structures with even greater implications by virtue of the synthesis. Man can

continue to relate to God in a sense of freedom and responsibility denied in the repetitious existence of mythical man. On the other hand, this freedom afforded the possibility of transcending and relativizing the historical world. Israel had never been able to completely disassociate itself from history, for history was the continual source of God's revelation. The "seat of existence" (Cobb) was no longer restricted to the rational consciousness, but was changeable and autonomous. Man's reflective consciousness could once again have its seat of existence periodically in the unconscious where mythical symbolization could once more occur, expanding a fuller realization of the relational mode of the covenant between God and man (the primary function of myth). With historical existence itself relativized, the Christ event marks the height and consequent end of history; it is the point from which man must go forth and to which man must return -- constantly expanding his awareness of the possibilities for that fuller realization of Christian experience. It was the Christ event that made the expansion process of the cyclical structure possible and totally new. Man no longer had to choose between repetitive cycles where freedom and creativity was limited to imitation, or, on the other hand, historicism, rationalism, dualism.

### C. The Revelatory Process: The Quest

The existential structure of cyclical expansion is based upon a covenantal relationship we have described as a "journey into being." It is the relational process of revelation envisioned as a Quest -- a

"quest for the sense of existence being met by a gift of a sense for existence." (Macquarrie) With the dynamic process of progression and return the notion of cyclical expansion can best be understood in terms of questing motifs: the home, the journey, the homecoming, and the journey once again. The home is a philosophical state, a place of self-identity, a place where man is fully himself in an idealized condition. It is the destination point, as well as the point of departure. As T.S. Eliot says: "Home is where one starts from. As we grow older the world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated, of dead and living."<sup>14</sup> The journey is the experiencing of life (diagrammatically, the circle). The homecoming is the return through conscious change to the source of meaning, the place of peace, the home. The home, however, is not realized in an ideal or static condition, but as a part of the process. The home is the homecoming, and both the journey and the homecoming give meaning to each other and the cycle as a whole. We return home with greater self-understanding, and journey forth again beyond ourselves in an act of faith -- faith that is made possible by the initiative of that towards which our faith is directed. (Again Macquarrie's definition of revelation.)

### 1. The Home: The Christ Event

*At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor  
fleshless;  
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,*

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<sup>14</sup>

T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1943), p. 31.

*Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement  
from nor towards,  
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,  
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.*

15

T.S. Eliot

We have said that Christ is the *Center* of existence. Cullmann calls it the "mid-point" of history; Collingwood, the "historical divider;"<sup>16</sup> to the faithful the mediator of God's revelation, the intercessor for man, the source and essence of authentic existence. The Christ event is an historical fact whose origins are beyond history.<sup>17</sup> It is, at once, the "decisive turning point" of history, the culmination of history, and the end of history. As Löwith describes it:

What really begins with the appearance of Jesus Christ is not a new epoch of secular history, called "Christian," but the beginning of an end. ... The "meaning" of history of this world is fulfilled against itself because the story of salvation, as embodied in Jesus Christ, redeems and dismantles, as it were, the hopeless history of the world.<sup>18</sup>

It is the fundamental proclamation of the historical Jesus' earthly ministry: a call to repentance precisely because this Age of History is ending as the New Age of God's Kingdom dawns.

The end of history also signifies the end of sequential time. Cullmann argues that, for example, even the Epistle to the Hebrews --

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Ibid., p. 15.

16

Collingwood, The Idea of History, p. 50.

17

Cullmann, Christ and Time, p. 19.

18

Löwith, Meaning in History, p. 197.

which is often considered Hellenistic in its spatial orientation --  
<sup>19</sup>  
 sets forth Christ's nature in time terminology; yet it is really the case that time is truncated. "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and today, and tomorrow." (Heb.13:8) The Christ event announces the establishment of life which is eternal, that is, a time without end. It is not the idea of time moving from the temporal 'here' to some eternal as-yet-undisclosed 'there'. Rather it is the presence of God's eternity with Christ in the manner that the Revelation of John ascribes to him: Christ, "the first and last, the beginning and the end." (Rev. 1: 17; 2:8; 22:13)

What is the Christ event itself? Kaufman, in his Systematic Theology, discusses 'Christ event' in terms of the Atonement, the Resurrection, and the Community of Love and Freedom.<sup>20</sup> Through the Incarnation God becomes at-one with man in Jesus Christ. Christ as the mediator and intercessor makes reparations for man as reconciliation before God. It is still God's initiatory act, as ultimately tested in Christ's resurrection.

God's revelation in a historical man is his self-disclosure in the "Son of Man," and the supreme test of his being the Son of God or a God-man is the Resurrection, by which he transcends the life and death of every conceivable historical man.<sup>21</sup>

With Christ's resurrection the bonds of historical existence are bro-

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<sup>19</sup>

Cullmann, Christ and Time, p. 50.

<sup>20</sup>

Gordon D. Kaufman, Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 389f.

<sup>21</sup>

Löwith, Meaning in History, p. 21.



ken. It is the victory over non-being. "For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him." (Rom.6:9) The life-and-death cycle that became an historical structure is here fulfilled and transcended with a new meaning of *new life*. The resurrection marks a victory over time, as well.

Faith's victory over the tragic transiency of historical time is dramatically expressed by the symbol of the resurrection. This symbol means that the negativities of human existence are overcome by the power of the Eternal, whose creativity in the beginning pushed back the chaos of non-being and created the world, whose grace overcomes the negativities of man's sin, and the power of whose eternity transcends the all-consuming flux of historical time.<sup>22</sup>

The resurrection, then, is a transhistorical event, with metahistorical significance. In The Sacred and the Profane, Eliade points out: "The religious man seeks to live as near as possible to the Center of his world ... For the Christian, it is Golgotha that is on the summit of the cosmic mountain."<sup>23</sup> Yet as the Epistle to the Hebrews makes clear, the sacrifice of Christ was not confined to the moment of Calvary. "For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified." (Heb.10:14)

The argument in 10:5-12 makes it clear that the offering of Christ was an extended process, beginning with the moment when he "entered the world" (vs.5) and concluding with the moment when he "sat down at the right hand of God" (vs.12). The offering was the total, indivisible event of his life-death-exaltation.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>

Wilburn, The Historical Shape of Faith, p. 28.

<sup>23</sup>

Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane ((New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1959), pp. 43,38.

<sup>24</sup>

Reginald H. Fuller and G. Ernest Wright, The Book of the Acts of God (New York: Doubleday, 1960), p. 363.

Structurally we have seen the Christ event as the point, and its actualization as the circle. It is two aspects of the one process, designated in the New Testament as  $\epsilon\phi\alpha\rho\alpha\varsigma$  (once only, once for all), and  $\omicron\iota\kappa\nu\nu\omicron\varsigma\iota\alpha$  (dispensation, the *heilsplan*).

The death he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. (Rom.6:10)

For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fulness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (Eph.1:9-10)

The once-for-all event, then, is still a dynamic, continuous process for those who participate in its existential dimensions. "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." (Rom.6:11) That participation for the early Christian church manifested itself in what Kaufman calls their "new-found communal faith," "their consciousness of the continuing activity of 'the God and Father of ... Jesus Christ' (Rom.15:6) in their historical existence, and not<sup>25</sup> the resuscitation of their former friend and leader."

This event, then, speaks decisively not only about who God is, but also as to who man is. Christians confess that in this event perfect humanity is manifested for the first time; that the manifestation of the whole nature of man has taken place in history; and through our participation in this event we come to know most fully the meaning of human, historical existence.<sup>26</sup>

This is the "community of love and freedom" Kaufman is talking about. It is the freedom to participate in "glorious suffering," the true meaning of Christ's death and resurrection. It is the dynamic process

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Kaufman, Systematic Theology, pp. 428-429.

26

Stevenson, History as Myth, p. 25.

initiated by God in Christ by which man comes to realize the ultimate act of self-giving love that is the essence of authentic existence.

Thus we claim the Christ event as our Home. It is the source of meaning where we are ideally ourselves. It is the single event that is not subject to cyclical repetition. It is the unique transhistorical model with metahistorical meaning and eschatological signification. But our fuller realization of the event (and consequently ourselves), requires us to return again and again to it, each time with a new, a different, a greater awareness of ourselves and our Christian existence. Hence, the journey.

*"In my beginning is my end."* 27  
T.S. Eliot

## 2. The Journey: The Circle

*He is the Way.  
Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;  
You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.* 28  
W.H. Auden

The Christian shares in the Christ event -- that is, his own self-identity -- to the extent that he can. Yet Christian existence cannot be fulfilled in the point, but in the circle. Man's realization of the Christ event yearns for actualization in his life. Thus Christian existence is fulfilled in the act of loving: that mystery of joy

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27

T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets, p. 23.

28

W.H. Auden, For the Time Being (London: Faber & Faber, 1945), p. 124.

and suffering where one discovers that only he who loses his life can find it. This love is fully understood within the nature of Christian existence in a cyclical structure, where the self transcends itself to find its new self closer to its ideal self.

This is not the idea of self-improvement or the popular notion of personality growth and development. The concept of developmental man is a modern myth with Greek origins. The Christian knows human nature is essentially corrupt and incapable of self-redemption, or even self-sufficiency in any meaningful way. Authentic existence lies in self-surrender to the 'other'. And who is the other? It should come as no surprise that the Good Samaritan is the *Traveller*; and his *Journey* is over a road filled with the sufferings of life and the self-interests of men. Jesus' whole ministry, too, was one of wandering; and those who would follow him must join him in his quest. So it is that with the call of the twelve Jesus tells the disciples to leave everything behind. (Mt.4:18f) It is not the road that man would choose for himself.

Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go. (John 21:18)

The quest, however, can be as much a journey away from Christ as it is a return to Christ. In his self-indulgence the Prodigal Son wanders his own way, and finds himself lost, exiled from his home (his source of existence). He returns home only through repentant self-denial, acknowledging his self-worthlessness. He dies to his old self to be born anew in the self-transcendent realm of his Father's love.

The journey process is as T.S. Eliot describes it:

*To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,  
 You must go by a way where in there is no ecstasy.  
 In order to arrive at what you do not know  
 You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.  
 In order to possess what you do not possess  
 You must go by the way of dispossession.  
 In order to arrive at what you are not  
 You must go through the way in which you are not.  
 And what you do not know is the only thing you know  
 And what you own is what you do not own  
 And where you are is where you are not.*

### 3. The Homecoming: Closing the Circle

*And the end of all our exploring  
 Will be to arrive where we started  
 And know the place for the first time.*

*The hint half guessed, the gift half understood, is  
 Incarnation.  
 Here the impossible union  
 Of spheres of existence is actual,  
 Here the past and future  
 Are conquered, and reconciled ...*

30

T.S. Eliot

We return home. We return "as children" to our Father's house. And what is that home to which we return? It is the event which marks the beginning and the ending to all our questing. It is the essence of the 'Whole', the entire revelatory process. It is the transcendent mystery, and the spawn of human history.

Löwith offers the abstract categories:

When a historical movement has unfolded its consequences, we reflect on its first appearance, in order to determine the meaning

of the whole, though particular, event -- "whole" by a definite point of departure and a final point of arrival.<sup>31</sup>

In the homecoming a cycle of revelation is completed and fulfilled. Man's existential quest ends at the point with recognition and acceptance of the gift of existential meaning. It is the point where the possibility of authentic existence is made *real* for man by the Grace of God in history. This point of acceptance is the threshold of new life -- not life for one's self, but self-sacrifice. This is what Tillich refers to as the "ecstasy" of the revelation event, that is,  
<sup>32</sup>  
 "standing outside one's self." Additionally,

Making use of Martin Heidegger's existential categories, Bultmann explains that when man, opening himself to the demands of love, accepts in total obedience the message of God's saving action, he escapes the anxiety of his normal worldly condition and achieves newness of life.<sup>33</sup>

This is how the point and the circle become one; it is *Christ in the world*. Because Christ is in the world we share in the Christ event as we die to our old selves and are raised up to new life *in the world*.

Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt ... and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. (Eph.4:22-4)

As we have said, the essence of the Home is *realized* as the completed revelatory act in the Homecoming, but is only *actualized* in the whole quest, which necessitates the Journey. It is *on the road* to Emmaus that two of Jesus' faithful followers are confronted with the existen-

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<sup>31</sup>

Löwith, Meaning in History, p. 5.

<sup>32</sup>

Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology (Chicago; Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967), I. 114f.

tial significance of their risen Lord. Thus we say the Christian is 'at home' in his quest. This is the tension that characterizes Christian existence; it is the paradox of God's love in the world we embrace. It is that *peace-in-strife* described in the twentieth century hymn:

*The peace of God, it is no peace,  
But strife closed in the sod.  
Yet, brothers, pray for but one thing —  
The marvelous peace of God.*

W.A. Percy

In this world of strife the essence of God's New World is revealed. And it is a revelation in which we can lose ourselves. (II Cor. 5:6-8) So we are no longer wanderers in a world of self-centered exile, but belong to that which is beyond this life. "So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and members of the household of God." (Eph.2:19)

Homecoming, then, is the absolute surrender to the grace of God, and being prepared to accept all encounters (indeed, all suffering) as "tokens" of his grace. This is what Bultmann refers to as the "radical<sup>34</sup> openness for the future," which characterizes Christian existence. The man who lives unto himself can only boast of what he has been; he lives in the past.

But to renounce such boasting, to surrender all his gain and count it but loss, indeed as 'dung' (Phil.3:7f), to surrender unreserved-

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Avery Dulles, Revelation Theology (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), p. 101.

34

Bultmann, Primitive Christianity, p. 184.

ly to the grace of God, to believe — all this is simply radical openness for the future.<sup>35</sup>

Confronted with such a future man cannot remain where he is, and be lost to the past. The Homecoming is not the end; for home is past and future, our origin and our destiny, the never-ending time of birth, death, and rebirth. As Bultmann (temporarily !) concludes: "It is to realize that we are always in via, that we have never reached the end."<sup>36</sup>

*What we call the beginning is often the end  
And to make an end is to make a beginning  
The end is where we start from.* 37  
T.S. Eliot

#### 4. Once Again, the Journey: Cyclical Expansion

*Here and there does not matter  
We must be still and still moving  
Into another intensity  
For a further union, a deeper communion  
Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,  
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters  
Of petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.* 38  
T.S. Eliot

So the quest continues; the circle is once again drawn. It is the process of new revelation -- the sought-after sanctification of man, and the progressive definitiveness of Christ's divinity. Each new circle is another age, an *aion*; and those "occasions of experience"

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35

Ibid.

36

Ibid.

37

T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets, p. 58.

38

Ibid., p. 32.



(Cobb) along the way, the *kronos*, are the *kairos*. Hence when Paul says, "The *kairos* has come for the judgement to begin at the house of God," (I Peter 4:17), he is referring not simply to the epochs of time, but the expected apocalypse of time with the New Age. And the household of God is the church that is to participate in "the powers of the age to come." (Heb.6:5) Each successive journey helps constitute the circles of eternity -- an eternity, we have said, not of the cessation of time, but of endless time. "Eternity is the redemption of the present time and its extension. It is time stretched out, and one enters it by a miracle of God's creation, the resurrection of the body."<sup>39</sup> (Cullmann!)

Consequently it is not a question of *one* circle; for one circle can easily be visualized in linear terms, as a movement from creation to final redemption. Nor is it a question of *many* circles that are no more than the imitative repetition of the one. In the New Testament every *kairos* is distinctively unique. This can be illustrated with the image of the growing temple (as we have seen in Ephesians 2:19-22), the image of the tree (Rom. 11), and the image of the harvest, which, as Lampert argues, "is not to be conceived in the Classical way as a cyclic course annually repeating itself, but as a momentous and final event."<sup>40</sup> "All these images have one feature in common, viz. that every moment of the proceeding Time has one and only one distinct situ-

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<sup>39</sup>

G. Ernest Wright, God Who Acts (London: SCM Press, 1952), p.117.

<sup>40</sup>

E. Lampert, The Apocalypse of History (London: Faber & Faber, 1948), p. 54.

ation in the historic whole."<sup>41</sup>

This differentiation can be carried further. It is not simply the case of a mere *succession* of individually distinct events, but their purposive *progression*. Now progress is a historical concept usually alien to any structure that could be described as cyclical. Consequently it is necessary to clarify what we mean in speaking of progress in the New Testament. For our purposes here we will use the term 'progression' as that which is normally associated with historical (linear) existence, and the term 'expansion' as the distinct characteristic of the proposed cyclical structure of Christian existence.

Bultmann clarifies the concept of expansion when he speaks of redemptive history versus empirical history. He sees the synoptic writers, with their Jewish eschatology interpreting an imminent apocalyptic end to the world, as representing a joint obstacle to the understanding of Christian existence as a life which always has future possibilities.

But when Paul says that faith, hope and love abide even when 'that which is perfect' is come (I Cor.13:13) he is bringing an important truth to light. This is that if real life means being open to the future, it can never be regarded as a definitive state of bliss. Faith and hope are the dispositions of those who are always looking for the grace of God as a future possibility.<sup>42</sup>

That search is a repetitive, but expanding journey whose 'history' (process, not progression) is redemptive revelation of God's action by grace, and man's reaction in faith. Consequently the meaning of ex-

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<sup>41</sup>

Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>42</sup>

Bultmann, Primitive Christianity, p. 186.

pansion is to be found in the concept of eschatology. To ask what the essence is of the expansion of the point (in cyclical terms now), we must simultaneously ask what the essence of the point is itself. The point -- the Christ event -- and the cyclical expansion of the point (what we will call 'Spirit') are understood to become *One* in the eschatological moment. As Bultmann points out, in every instance, the *kairos* has "the possibility of becoming eschatological."<sup>43</sup> As a result the once-problematic delay of the Parousia becomes the Interim of promise and fulfillment. Cullmann wants to resolve the issue, instead, by putting the "center, the fixed point of orientation," not in the future, but in the past -- so far in the past (in temporal terms) that it becomes "an assured fact which cannot be touched by the delay of the Parousia."<sup>44</sup> He does not realize it is not a matter of *time*. It is not a question of 'when', according to historical/apocalyptic time-tables, but of 'how'. The 'when' is only actualized in the infinite expansion of the 'how'. Consequently the concept of the future, the infinity of time, is fully embraced with joy in Christian existence, rather than dreaded in its unpredictability. The means become part of the end, as the nearness of God is more fully realized in the in-breaking of the Kingdom. Christian hope *is* the Kingdom, gradually fulfilled in the process of cyclical expansion.

The notion of the Kingdom is the "fulcrum of the ideal," by

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<sup>43</sup>

Wilburn, The Historical Shape of Faith, p. 215.

<sup>44</sup>

Cullmann, Christ and Time, p. 88.

which this realized eschatology expands.<sup>45</sup> The Kingdom is already at hand, and yet as an *eschaton*, still to come; time is already fulfilled, but not yet consummated. It is the paradox D'Arcy describes, that "in the coming of Christ history reaches its fulfillment and termination and nevertheless does not stop."<sup>46</sup> The result of this profound ambiguity is a "supreme tension between conflicting wills, 'running' a race, the goal of which is neither an airy ideal nor a massive reality but the promise of salvation."<sup>47</sup> It is the tension between the two worlds, the world of man and the Kingdom of God, the world of the flesh and the world of the Spirit. Man lives in the present "evil age" (Gal. 1:4), whose powers have been broken by Christianity, but not eliminated. The notion of spirit is important not as it has always been used in conjunction with man's 'spiritual' nature, but here as regards his 'historical' nature. In his article, "The Transcending of Time in History," Giovanni Gentile asserts that the true reality of all history lies in the actualization of 'spirit'.

Reality is spirit; and spirit never is but is always coming to be, not something given but a free activity. That is what distinguishes it from nature, and, such being its essence, spirit, which is identical with reality, is history, or the process of self-realization.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>

Wilburn, The Historical Shape of Faith, p. 27.

<sup>46</sup>

M.C. D'Arcy, The Sense of History (London: Faber & Faber, 1959), p. 195.

<sup>47</sup>

Lówith, Meaning in History, p. 184.

<sup>48</sup>

Raymond Klibansky and J.J. Paton (eds.) Philosophy and History (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 91.

We are called on to see the invisible workings of God behind the visible affairs of the world. As T.S. Eliot visualizes it:

Without elimination, both a new world  
And the old made explicit, understood  
In the completion of its partial ecstasy,  
The resolution of its partial horror.

What is man to do? And how is he to respond?

Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom.12:2)

We are in this world, but not of this world; we do not live in the flesh, but the Spirit. This is the core of Macquarrie's existentialist theology.

Thus man's authentic existence is 'after the spirit' (*kata pneuma*). The Christian walks 'not after the flesh, but after the spirit.' And just as *sarr* meant not a substance but a way of man's being, in which he is oriented to the world, to the visible, the tangible, and the temporal, so *pneuma* is not a substance either, but that way of being in which man is oriented to God, to the invisible and eternal.<sup>50</sup>

The Christian doctrine of the Holy Spirit is the dynamic essence of expansion in which man participates for meaningful existence. We become part of the New Creation (II Cor.5:17) in the process by which all creation has been 'groaning' towards completion (Rom.8:22). "For in this hope we are saved," we who are "the first fruits of the Spirit." (Rom. 8:24,23)

This hope is the foundation of all of man's response to God's

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T.S. Eliot, Four Quartets, p. 49.

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John Macquarrie, An Existentialist Theology (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 138.

revelation. It is the structure of faith, the attitude of man in which he recognizes the gift of God's grace. Though we say God reveals himself in history (for that is our outward realm of existence), we know<sup>51</sup> revelation never appeals to historical tests but to faith. We are reminded of Eliade's resolution that it is only the creative freedom of man's faith in God's limitlessness that liberates him from the tragedy of history. What then is this relationship of faith and freedom? And how can it be understood in our structure of cyclical-expansion?

Paul understands faith primarily as obedience, following the acceptance of the kerygmatic message. (Rom.1:5) Obedience is the surrender of all self-pretensions. When man realizes he is nothing in and of himself he can have and be all things through God (II Cor.12:9f) The believer is lord over all things. (I Cor.3:21) By true obedience man is freed from all attempts to redeem himself by works. He is freed from the bondage of sin and death (I Cor.7:17f), and enslaved to righteousness. (Rom.6:16-18) It is what Bultmann calls the "paradoxical servitude"<sup>52</sup> of the Christian. How can we understand this freeing process? How can man die to his old self? Here again lies the significance of our cyclical-expansion structure of Christian existence.

We have said that our structure is characterized by expansion, and not succession or progression as in historical existence of developmental man. We admittedly can speak of progression within each cycle,

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51

Cullmann, Christ and Time, p. 100.

52

Rudolf Bultmann, Theology of the New Testament (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951), I, 52.

of course, and progression from one cycle to the next -- in that there is a past which *can* be encompassed. The term connotes this. But progression suggests a logical cause/effect syndrome which, while still possible in the conscious experience of our new cyclical structure, is not a historical 'necessity'. Here lies a basic distinction between expansion and progression. Progression necessarily incorporates the past in striving for meaning in future experience; expansion need not. This is the heightened sense of meaning cyclical expansion can give to the notion of freedom in Christian existence. For primitive man, new meaning or understanding in tradition of law was not possible; it was simply to be upheld. For historical man, upholding or confronting the past in the present meant future consequences; fulfillment of law was still the emphasis in the Old Testament. In the cyclical structure of Christian existence the past need not be struggled with; a new circle can *circumvent* it (diagrammatically, as a third dimension to a previously two-dimensional structure), and the range of possibilities for new experiences immeasurably multiplied. This is how Christian man can leave his former self behind, once he has accepted forgiveness for his repented past. Only confession and forgiveness can make him a new man and give him a fresh start.

Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. (Phil.3:12-14)

This new-found freedom raises a myriad of ethical questions regarding man's responsibility to himself and others. It is the question

of a life of faith. Bultmann writes, faith "determines one's living in its manifold historical reality, and there is no moment in which the man of faith is released from the obedience of constantly living out of the 'grace' of God."<sup>53</sup> The universalism of Christ's lordship (I Cor. 15:25f) is, in Wilburn's appraisal, "the ultimate basis of the validity of Christian ethical action."<sup>54</sup> It is the absolute demand of faith that renders all other moral addendums relative in value. Though Paul argues man *is* capable of distinguishing between good and evil (Rom.2:14f), alone he is unable to will the good. But as Wright points out, the *Kerygma* is more than a "religiously motivated idealistic ethic."<sup>55</sup> It is itself the absolute imperative to authentic existence: "Put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." (Eph.4:24) Here is where we find Christian responsibility for the world. Moral responsibility is characteristically associated with historical progress, that is, the betterment of society according to some standard of valuation. The alleviation of strife and suffering are universally accepted ideals; yet they often remain precisely that -- ideals. Peculiarly, the Christian finds it is in *taking on* the suffering of the world that he can experience tokens of God's grace and the establishment of God's reign. "For though I am free from

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53

Ibid., I,53.

54

Wilburn, The Historical Shape of Faith, p. 28.

55

Wright, God Who Acts, p. 119.



all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more."  
 (I Cor.9:19) To the seemingly-harsh judgement of Jesus that the world  
 will always have the poor (Mt.26:11), we have, as well, the comfort of  
 the beatitude: "Blessed are the poor, for their's is the kingdom of  
 heaven." (Mt.5:3)

We inherit the Kingdom through faithful suffering with Christ.  
 It is a constantly-freeing ever-expanding process whereby the power of  
 God's reign fills human existence with transcendent meaning. The jour-  
 ney of man is fulfilled and renewed as we return time and again to that  
 heavenly city prepared for us by God. (Heb.11:10,16) "For here we have  
 no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come." (Heb.13:14)

*He is the Truth.  
 Seek him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;  
 You will come to a great city  
 that has expected your return for years.*

56

W.H. Auden

#### D. The Cyclical Dimension: Myth and Ritual

Until now our discussion of a new structure for Christian exist-  
 ence has been primarily concerned with the concept of expansion, and  
 how it can be successfully differentiated from the more standard ap-  
 proach, i.e., linear-historical existence. In a sense all I have been  
 doing is expounding upon one basic orthodox thought: and that is that  
 all Christian theology is no more than expanding circles upon the  
 Christ event. However, we have yet to deal directly with the cyclical

dimension of our structure as regards its evolutionary origins from more primitive existence. This can best be approached in terms of myth and ritual.

For historical man the cyclical structure of primitive existence was regarded as meaningless, even terrifying. Where, he would ask, is the breaking point to the endless continuum of cycles? For the Christian that point is revealed in the Christ event; the cycle does not cease, however, but continues to expand upon the point. The repeated rituals of Christianity, with all the power of their mythopoeic language retained, become the appropriate expressions of responsive faith. First we must determine how we can speak of a revivification of myth in the structure of cyclical expansion. Then we can see how it applies to the cyclical mode of Christian rites and worship.

From the beginning of existence myth has been an existential reality. It is significant that, whereas history has lost sight of its real purpose, myth has retained it. For the *real* purpose of both myth and history is not, as Bultmann says, "to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but to express man's understanding of himself in the world in which he lives."<sup>57</sup> While myths represent for Cullmann<sup>58</sup> "historically uncontrollable elements," Stevenson achieves a unity in what Cullmann considers an "amalgamation," and speaks of history *as myth*. This essential unity of history and myth, as purported by Steven

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<sup>57</sup>

Bultmann, Kerygma and Myth, p. 10.

<sup>58</sup>

Oscar Cullmann, Salvation in History (London: SCM Press, 1967), p. 137.

son, can be linked with our structure of cyclical expansion.

In distinction from Cullmann's school of thought, Stevenson's concern with history is not in any overarching scheme of plotting past and future, but in dealing with the question: What does it mean to see human experience as being basically historical in nature? It is not to distinguish holy history and secular history, for that implies two separate kinds of phenomena: "holy events, or history; and, presumably, unholy events, or history." Stevenson's interest in the concept of history is in the origin and nature of historical consciousness (i.e., the existential quest in which revelation occurs), and not in the field of speculative philosophy of history (Hegel, Marx, Spengler, Toynbee, etc.), or with regard to specific problems within historical thinking such as historical causation and necessity, inevitability, etc. As a result Stevenson regards history as, "a way of perceiving and ordering the totality of human experience in which ultimate or sacral meaning is understood to be present in empirical and transitory phenomena. Moreover, the historical process is seen to be driving forward in hope of an even greater realization of meaning."<sup>59</sup> It is from just such a perspective that Stevenson asserts that "history is mythic in its perceptions of reality."<sup>60</sup> As the basis of this assertion he outlines the characteristic qualities of myth as presented by Eliade in Myth and Reality.

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59

Stevenson, History as Myth, p. 15.

60

Ibid., p. 16.

Myth: constitutes the History of the acts of the Supernaturals; ... is absolutely *true* (because it is concerned with realities) and *sacred* (Because it is the work of the Supernaturals); ... is always related to a 'creation', it tells how something came into existence (that is why myths constitute the paradigms for all significant human acts). Further, one *lives* the myth, in the sense that one is seized by the sacred, exalting power of the events recollected or re-enacted.<sup>61</sup>

Hence such an historical consciousness is a mythic view of reality.

The myth of history, however, can be differentiated from the myth of primitive existence.

Whereas myths of the eternal return speak of man's 'original participation' in the divine, marked by immediacy and passivity, the myth of history speaks of man's 'final participation' in the divine, marked by our active and creative participation in the divine plan.<sup>62</sup>

Mythical man, in either primitive or historical existence, knows that the ground of his being lies outside himself; and that that ground of being is beyond the realm of known and tangible reality. Myth then, according to Bultmann, is "the expression of man's awareness that he is not lord of his own being."<sup>63</sup> Yet Christian man finds expression for an existence of "having nothing, and yet possessing everything." (II Cor.6:10) When the Christian participates in the mystical body of Christ (how mythopoeic!), he becomes a "supernatural" in his own self-transcendence; with the Incarnation man becomes mythically *real*.<sup>64</sup>

From the time of primitive existence man has attempted to 'live' his myths principally through their re-enactment in participatory rit-

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61

Ibid., p. 17.

62

Ibid., p. 7.

63

Bultmann, Kerygma and Myth, p. 11.

64

Stevenson, History as Myth, p. 26.

ual. For both primitive man and the man of speculative history that participation had been the imitation or re-enactment of past mythical or historical events; for the Christian, however, the myth is only alive in the *present* -- in man's experience of it. The myth of Christianity is as much an event to be realized in the future as it is an event having occurred in the past. It is precisely because Christian existence can be conceived in terms of cyclical expansion that mythic ritual does not become the meaningless repetition of cyclical existence, or lost to a past in linear existence.

The ritualistic expressions of baptism and eucharist contain all the elements of myth: they are cyclical in their structure and mythopoeic in their language; they are made real and sacred in the repetition of man's participation in them. The life and death cycle is celebrated as a ritual not only of initiatory birth, but of continuing and expanding rebirth. It is the cycle of journey, return, and a new quest. Nicodemus was not just playing the king's fool when his rational mind queried over Jesus' imperative concerning rebirth; the myth of a return to the womb was real for primitive man, and an appropriate origin for an expansionary structure regarding Christian baptism. As Eliade observes of Indian initiation rituals,

The initiation myths and rites of *regressus ad uterum* reveal the following fact: the 'return to the origin' prepares a new birth, but then new birth is not a repetition of the first, physical birth. There is properly speaking a mystical rebirth, spiritual in nature -- in other words, access to a new mode of existence (involving sexual maturity, participation in the sacred and in culture; in short, becoming 'open' to the Spirit).<sup>65</sup>

The mythic ritual of the Lord's Supper, too, is not simply a re-enactment of the Last Supper, but a repeated rehearsal of the eschatological banquet already being realized. Some eucharistic rites proclaim what is called the "mystery of faith": "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again!" In mythic participation we die and rise with Christ. Yet it is not simply trite mythic expressions with which man distinguishes a sacred ideal from secular history. For the Christian,, the myth that personifies the ideal *intent* is *actualized* in a structure of existence in which myth and history are fulfilled with transcendent meaning. Like the Christian concept of altruistic love, the emphasis falls on the intention prior to action. Christian man 'lives' the myth only to the extent that those ritualistic expressions are manifested in his actions in the historical world. Professor Edward C. Hobb's idea of worship is not as radical as it may seem when he suggests that church is not the place we encounter God. Worship is but the rehearsal so we will know right actions when we encounter Him in the real world. Thus our existential faith is not fulfilled in the point (the Christ event, the Home), but in the circle (the Journey). Today, in the world of 'Now', it is this faith and love that uniquely  
66  
characterize Christian existence. As W.H. Auden concludes:

*He is the Life.  
Love Him in the World of the Flesh;  
And at your marriage all its occasions  
shall dance for joy.*

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<sup>65</sup>  
Mircea Eliade, Myth and Reality (New York: Harper & Row, 1963),  
p. 81.

<sup>66</sup>  
Auden, For the Time Being, p. 124.

## Chapter IV

## IMPLICATIONS:

## A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO THE MODERN AGE

*What is man's true life? ... When the question emerges in the historic course of a given culture, it is a sign that the foundations of the culture have become faulty, and that people are no longer un-selfconsciously at home in it.*<sup>1</sup>

John Macquarrie

"CHRIST FOR THE WORLD WE SING!" So goes a standard hymn of Christendom. It is Christianity's claim to universal relevance, paradoxically by the *skandalon* of particularity; it asserts the ultimately significant reality manifested in an obscure historical fact of long ago. Out of a profound love *for* the world, but not *of* the world, it fulfills its unique responsibility to each culture and situation into which it expands. It is not shaped by the particularities of the culture, but stands fast to the criterion by which its faith, and that of the world's, is judged.<sup>2</sup> Because of their claim to universality Christians are not historical people bound to a particular world destiny; nor is their faith subject to those categories of historical verification. Christianity sees its peculiar and audacious position in the world as the extension of the mediation of divine revelation. And from

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<sup>1</sup>  
John Macquarrie, An Existentialist Theology (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 135.

<sup>2</sup>  
Ralph G. Wilburn, The Historical Shape of Faith (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), p. 149.

this perspective it performs its two-fold task: the extending to the world the gift of authentic existence; and prophetic criticisms of human life and society.<sup>3</sup>

Yet what is the nature of the modern world to which the Christian speaks? And what is the power of the message that is heard?

#### A. Faith, and a World Divided Against Itself

The modern world is still the result of an evolutionary-historical process. It is decidedly secular, and yet, as Löwith maintains, expresses a disjunctive development: "it is Christian by derivation and anti-Christian by consequence."<sup>4</sup> It is the result of a perverted eschatological view of history in which a "post-Christian world is a creation without a creator." It is a view which lives by the hope in a better world and yet its hope is set on material production and welfare.<sup>5</sup> (Marx) Such an historical view rejects the myths of Christianity, only to embrace the meaningless myths of modern science. As Karl Jaspers remarks, true myth cannot be interpreted rationally, but only by *new* myths;<sup>6</sup> yet the fanciful myth-making being produced today is essentially rationalistic. The failure of such myths to afford modern

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<sup>3</sup>  
Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>4</sup>  
Karl Löwith, Meaning in History (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1949), p. 202.

<sup>5</sup>  
Ibid., pp. 201-202.

<sup>6</sup>  
Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Jaspers, Myth and Christianity (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1958), p. 16.



secular man any transcendent reality has lead to the contemporary affliction Eliade has described as the "terror" of history: the inability to 'make' history, that is, to shape the course of history, into any significant reality. Despite all man's efforts the progression of history remains the endless drama of suffering and failure, the tragedy of human life. As a result, the secular world 'come of age' is a post-historical existence that, by its consequent nature, negates the possibility of discerning any meaning in the temporal affairs of man.

What then is the message of Christianity in this modern secular age? How is Christianity to proclaim that message of Good News? It is a testament for authentic existence, and the renunciation of inauthentic existence. It is proclaimed *as* sheer faith, *by* sheer faith.

If we have taken seriously the notion of cyclical-expansion as a structure of authentic Christian existence, the post-historical dilemma of modern man has not only been reckoned with, but affirmed! And yet its conclusions are assertions of transcendent authenticity, and not senseless despair. It does not deny the tragedy that is human history, but participates fully in it by virtue of the creative and responsible freedom of faith. Such faith is not personified by the blind fool flailing in the dark and clinging to any illusory intangibility. It is an intentional assertion that man's existential quest transcends his doubts in the affirmation of a greater revelatory process. The man of faith does not claim the visionary of any special looking-glass through history, divine or otherwise. In this sense he is very much like the skeptic, as Löwith points out by comparison.

Neither pretends to discern on the canvas of human history the purpose of God or of the historical process itself. They rather seek to set men free from the world's oppressive history by suggesting an attitude, either of skepticism or of faith, which is rooted in an experience certainly nurtured by history but detached from and surpassing it, and thus enabling man to endure it with mature resignation or with faithful expectation. Religious faith is so little at variance with skepticism that both are rather united by their common opposition to the presumptions of a settled knowledge.

A man who lives by thought must have his skepticism — literally, a passion for search — which may end in upholding the question as question or in answering it by transcending his doubt through faith.<sup>7</sup>

Thus the skeptic and the man of faith have a common antinomy with the modern secularist. Confronted by the existential meaninglessness of history, it is they who confront the question of ultimate meaning *beyond* history. In this sense they both transcend history. But the man of faith goes one step further; he transcends his doubts as well.

We know from whence man has come. Has he now *arrived*? To what extent can we say the structure and essence of Christian existence -- as we have outlined it here -- are the unique, ultimate and final disclosure of God in the world?

#### B. Christian Existence and the Question of Finality

Simply put, the question of finality, as regards our Christian Structure of existence, is wholly unanswerable because of its unassailable stance of faith. As such, 'finality' becomes a mute question. Yet the impetus of our evolutionary-historical approach presses the question. As John Cobb says: To what extent can "Spiritual" (Christian)

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<sup>7</sup>

Löwith, Meaning in History, p. vi.

existence be considered the final and dominant end of that historical development of Western axial man? And if it cannot be surpassed or transcended "intrapsychically," what is the future for realized eschatology?<sup>8</sup> Cobb suggests it lies in the "relational" mode of spiritual existence and in a "refinement and increasing understanding of the reality already given."<sup>9</sup> As such, 'finality' is an existential question within the context of Christian existence itself: the possibility of spiritual existence surpassing or transcending itself. In his "intrapsychic" mode of analysis, Cobb argues that spiritual existence, by its definition (self-transcending self) *cannot* be transcended. However, the "relational" mode of analyzing existence, Cobb suggests, can offer new possibilities within the unsurpassability of spiritual existence and the finality of Jesus Christ.

The new possibilities for interrelationship among men, and especially of relationship with God, for which we may hope, are already foreshadowed and embodied in him (Jesus Christ). To move forward across new thresholds will not require some new impulse -- only the fuller realization of what has already been given to us in him.<sup>10</sup>

That process of "fuller realization" is the "relational" mode of our structure of Christian existence that has been characterized by the notion of cyclical expansion. It is in this sense -- as I have maintained from the outset -- that our thesis here does not bring us to a *new* threshold of Christian existence, but rather heightens that "rela-

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<sup>8</sup>

John B. Cobb, Jr., The Structure of Christian Existence (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), p. 137.

<sup>9</sup>

Ibid., p. 144

<sup>10</sup>

Ibid.

tional" mode whereby man's fuller realities are expansively fulfilled in the consummation of the source and essence of Ultimate Being, that reality already given to us.

That reality -- what all religions crave -- has in Christian revelation become historical actuality. The dreams of incarnation and resurrection, for example, reflect the hopes of all mystery religions. As Rust observes: "What men dreamed of in their myths of incarnation and resurrection has in Christian revelation been wrought savingly into the stuff of human history."<sup>11</sup> Finality inevitably comes round (once again!) to the claim of God's unique revelation in man. Tillich provides the doctrinal proposition:

The first and basic answer theology must give to the question of the finality of the revelation in Jesus as the Christ is the following: a revelation is final if it has the power of negating itself without losing itself. This paradox is based on the fact that every revelation is conditioned by the medium in and through which it appears. The question of the final revelation is the question of a medium of revelation which overcomes its own finite conditions by sacrificing them, and itself with them. He who is the bearer of the final revelation ... becomes completely transparent to the mystery he reveals. But, in order to be able to surrender himself completely, he must possess himself completely. And only he can possess -- and therefore surrender -- himself completely who is united with the ground of his being and meaning without separation and disruption. In the picture of Jesus as the Christ we have the picture of a man who posits these qualities, a man who, therefore, can be called the medium of final revelation.<sup>12</sup>

The significance of Tillich's understanding of final revelation

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<sup>11</sup>

Eric C. Rust, Towards a Theological Understanding of History (New York: Oxford. Univ. Press, 1963), p. 95.

<sup>12</sup>

Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967), I, 133.

is the release it provides from the finitude of human history. There is nothing final in anything that is finite. The Jesus of history is negated in his transparency to the divine mystery; his death becomes the final manifestation of his transparency. "Jesus of Nazareth is sacrificed to Jesus as the Christ."<sup>13</sup> Thus Christianity is not a Jesus-centered religion. As Tillich says, "Jesus is the religious and theological object as the Christ and only as the Christ. And he is the Christ as the one who sacrifices what is merely 'Jesus' in him."<sup>14</sup>

The consequence of this final revelation is its assertion of universality. The unconditional and universal claim of Christianity does not assert any finality for itself, but only for that to which it bears witness. In the transhistorical model of Jesus, Christianity transcends the temporariness of existence as the eternal manifestation of Christ in the world of God and man. How then does the Christian witness to that final, never-ending revelation?

### C. Christian Existence and the Question of Contemporaneity

*Men's curiosity searches past and future  
And clings to that dimension. But to apprehend  
The point of intersection of the timeless  
With time, is an occupation for the saint...*

T.S. Eliot

*The theological problem today is to find the  
art of drawing religion out of man, not pumping  
it into him. The redemption has happened. The  
Holy Spirit is in men. The art is to help men  
become what they are.*

Karl Rahner

We have said that our structure of Christian existence is the manifestation of God's final revelation -- to the extent that it bears witness *in that finality* in the metahistorical presence of Christ in the world. To what extent is this structure, which we have characterized as cyclical-expansion, uniquely and exclusively 'Christian'? For the concept of the archetypal questing man is a universal motif found in every age, in every culture, in every religion. What is so peculiar to the notion of cyclical-expansion that its structure is existentially viable only in the context of Christian theology?

Such a claim to exclusivity ultimately rests with the unity of our structure of existence and its content. In a schematized historicistic view, the structural framework is distinguishable from the specific contents, the latter being the peculiar facts of a particular history accompanied by their interpretation. In the schematic structure of cyclical-expansion, however, the point and the circle become as one, with each particularity giving meaning that is indistinguishable from the process as a whole. Cyclical-expansion is that exclusive process which bears witness to the uniqueness of the *Kerygma* and the finality of revelation.

How can such an assertion be examined? The legitimacy of our claim is demonstrable in two ways: one is the manner in which the Christian experiences the real presence of that final revelation, that is, the contemporaneity of Christ; the other is the distinct and subse-

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Ibid., I, 135.

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Ibid., I, 134.

quent response of the Christian to the human world of suffering and failure, that is, the tragedy of human history.

The contemporaneity of Christ is grasped only by a fusion of one's christological and cosmological understandings. The ancient *Kerygma* that proclaims Christ's presence transcends historical forms and assumes contemporary validity only to the extent that those who bear its witness do so through the full participation in the world of human history. For though the world is corrupt, by the act of God's incarnation man is infused with the sacred. Man has within him the possibility of authentic existence, though only by his faithful recognition of the source from whence it comes. The world is secular only by man's failure to recognize the sacred. History, whether *perceived* as sacred or profane, stands under God's judgement. But as Rust describes it, "secular history is the scene of God's judgement, of God shutting men up in their sin, of life in the wilderness, ... a life of frustration and despair."<sup>15</sup> Sacred history is still the world of suffering and sinful man; but it is, too, as Rust speaks of it:

Already we have Christ in us, the hope of glory. Here, in a pale and broken way, within our creaturely time, we share the life of God's eternity, the life of the Age-to-Come. We carry our treasures in earthen vessels, and we have not yet attained our goal. But eternal possibilities are opened up to us which stretch beyond the limits set by our creaturely time. So we press on to the high mark of our calling in Christ which he has made us free to attain.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>

Rust, Towards a Theological Understanding of History, p. 81.

<sup>16</sup>

*Ibid.*, pp. 230-231.

This present realization of the Age-to-Come has been described by Kierkegaard as "repetition," not in the Greek sense as a recollection of the past, nor in the Hebrew's forward-looking expectation in the Day of the Lord, but in the experience of a present and eternal life in Christ framed by the order of creaturely time.

'Repetition' means that the future acts in the present in order to restore and repeat the past at a higher level. Man's guilty past is transformed by forgiveness, and the *eschaton* enters history to restore man's lost image in Christ's new humanity. The old Adam is restored and repeated in the Second Adam with a newer and richer possibility.<sup>17</sup>

This repetition can also be linked to Kierkegaard's concept of contemporaneousness with Christ. In *Training in Christianity*, he writes:

For in relation to the absolute, there is only one tense: the present. For him who is not contemporary with the absolute, for him it has no existence. And as Christ is the absolute, it is easy to see that with respect to Him there is only one situation: that of contemporaneousness.<sup>18</sup>

Cullmann wants to dismiss Kierkegaard's notion. For it "transfers us back into the time of the incarnation; it makes us contemporaries of the apostles ... hence we can only go back to him in order to enter the realm of salvation."<sup>19</sup> Of such an "overleaping" effect Cullmann concludes,

... as our distance in time from Christ's death continues to increase, we would also be removed ever farther from this event's essential meaning, that is, its significance for salvation.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>

*Ibid.*, p. 231.

<sup>18</sup>

Søren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1952), p. 62.

<sup>19</sup>

Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), p. 146.



Cullmann's criticism is accurate within the historical structure which views redemption as a time line. For Kierkegaard, however, such a historical perspective tells us nothing of Christianity.

And why not? Because one cannot 'know' anything at all about 'Christ', for he is the paradox, the object of faith, and exists only for faith. But all historic information is communication of 'knowledge.' Therefore one cannot learn anything about Christ from history.<sup>21</sup>

For Kierkegaard then, to "go back" to Christ is not a leap of time, but a leap of faith. Our contemporaneity with Christ is our never-ending *return* to the "object of our faith." This is the sum total of Kierkegaard's Preparation for a Christian Life.<sup>22</sup> It is an invitation to *come home*, as Christ beckons us: "Come hither unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Mt.11:28)

Such a place of rest is not *of* the world; but neither is it separate *from* the world. It is *in* the world in its full contemporaneity with all the suffering and despair of the world. It is as Fackenheim has described the tenuous position of today's Christian -- as that of "the self-exposure of faith to the modern secular world and all its works."<sup>23</sup> It is, for instance, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's confrontation with a "World-come-of-age," where the anti-Christian powers are de-

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Ibid., p. 168.

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Soren Kierkegaard, Selections From the Writings of Kierkegaard (New York: Doubleday, 1960), p. 169.

22

Ibid., p. 153f.

23

Emil L. Fackenheim, Quest for Past and Future (Scarborough, Ontario: Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1968), p. 281.

nounced, "not in the name of modern humanism but rather of the ancient gospel ... brought to new life."<sup>24</sup> Christianity fully recognizes human existence as a history of suffering and failure. Christian faith's claim to contemporaneity does not pretend to deny the reality of tragic existence. It does, however, speak to its peculiar understanding of that tragedy. In the modern world the tragic (and true) vision of human existence has been truncated by a modern delusion of that tragedy. It is the Christian structure of existence that offers an authentic tragic vision, a way to comprehend human existence and consummate its suffering and strife.

#### D. Christian Existence and the Future of Tragedy

*This is the central paradox of the tragic vision of our day. The suffering that tragedy enacts makes us face the truth, in all its terror and grandeur, of the human situation and gives us the moral strength to rise reborn out of the grave of despair. Though it makes us behold the most terrifying aspects of existence, its pain and waste and inexpugnable evils, it does not induce a feeling of resignation. Life may be chaos and catastrophe, but the tragic vision protests against the fate of meaninglessness.*<sup>25</sup>

The notion of tragedy has traditionally been juxtaposed to a 'Christian' view of existence. Christianity reverses the tragic formula: out of failure comes success, out of death eternal life; whereas the 'tragic' vision retains the "anguish of uncertainty, the piercing pain of doubt, the dread and fear, and despair."<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, I

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<sup>24</sup>

Ibid.

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Charles I. Glicksberg, The Tragic Vision in Twentieth-Century Literature (Carbondale: So. Illinois Univ. Press, 1960), p. 15.

would suggest, the tradition has been wielding a sword that is all blade and no handle, the result being a hatchet job of the integrity of tragic existence as a whole, despite sectarian biases. Now, in the gruesome midst of dismembered twentieth century alternatives, we grope to find something of the tragic left in some vision of life; and in this quest we realize that a sense for the tragic has not only been lost in the modern vision, but that a recovery of the tragic -- of existence itself -- is only possible in a Christian structure of existence.

Human existence is essentially tragic. In Greek terms it is the dichotomous tension that results in man's quest for primordial Oneness, but can be grasped only by individuation. Greek tragedy is understood as the synthesis of tension between these two aspects of human nature. Existence is characterized as paradoxical, absurd, cruel, incomprehensible, and ultimately meaningless. Because of the unavailability of man's condition, the Greeks sought to transfigure life in the illusory and aesthetic realm of art, thereby rendering suffering endurable. "The artist performs an invaluable function in veiling the intolerable truth of nothingness. It is through the mediation of the tragic work of art that the will to live is renewed and redeemed."<sup>27</sup> Such illusion, however, was self-transparent and could not disguise its origins.

Consequently, in the modern world of secular man (characterized by such schools of thought as nihilism, existentialism, fatalism and

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Nathan A. Scott, Jr., The Tragic Vision and the Christian Faith (New York: Association Press, 1957), pp. 14-15.

27

Glicksberg, Tragic Vision in Twentieth-Century Literature, p. 30.

absurdism), the mythic illusions that sustained the Greeks collapse in dismissable categories of meaningless artificialities. The contemporary counterpart to the ancient Greek rejects the comfort of the outward illusion of order, but still suffers, of course, from the necessity for individuation. He may claim that in place of order there is chaos, and that the only meaning is the absence of meaning; but the tragic vision remains essentially the same. Chaos and nothingness fit as appropriately as artificial categories of order and reason and meaning.

As Albert Camus points out, Nietzsche replied in the affirmative to the question of ultimate concern: Can one live, believing in nothing? "Yes, *if one creates a system* out of the absence of a system, if one accepts the final consequences of nihilism."<sup>28</sup>

Even the illusion is not wholly rejected, but only painfully obscured; this is observable in the still-operative 'antidotal' nature of this type of vision. By it, outward illusion becomes secondhand illusion and eventually underhanded delusion. The increased awareness of self-deception in the face of a meaningless world only heightens the mad persistence in the impossible quest for meaning that constitutes the tragic vision. The consequent reaction is not the fateful resolution of the Greeks to an unexplainable order, but rebellion within the confines of that dreadful, fateful freedom encountered in the endless expanse of nothingness. It is a profane sort of redemption.

Rebelling against the tyranny of time, the absurdity of his lot, the ignominy of death, the modern hero as victim achieves no culminating moment of transfiguration or redemption ... In the arche-

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Ibid., p. 29.

typal struggle against necessity, he is bound to lose, but it is this very knowledge that leads him to rebel against his fate. Neither villain nor saint, he looks upon himself as a victim who has chosen to revolt. He exists, therefore he rebels: that is the mark of his humanity.<sup>29</sup>

But one can only rebel in context; the rebel is limited in that he is necessarily the counterpart to that against which he rebels. The shell of the Greek tragic vision remains, but the intellectualization of the mythic spirit coupled with the crumbled pillars of disillusionment in ever-changing and unsustaining orders in historical existence, have resulted in the development of a vision of life that is more pitiful than tragic. That is to say, it is only regrettable when a vision of life attempts to deny the origins (the conditions of tragedy) it cannot possibly escape.

For example modern man rejects history as a means of transcending human existence. At the same time the endless continuum of primitive existence appears still more tragic. Where is the breaking point? In Christian existence that point has already been made. Now the question can be turned back upon modern man: What of the journeyman without a home, a destination? For this is the true dilemma of modern man; he wanders in self-imposed exile by his negation of tragic (human) existence.

Such a homeless condition is the plight that characterizes the modern literary hero. In Kafka's The Castle, K.'s pilgrimage is but a modern labyrinth whose journey's end is without completion. Like

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Ibid., p. 8.

the attendants in Beckett's Waiting for Godot, his life's task becomes that of interminable waiting; time stands still with endless terror, or in mute idleness. The "inertia" of Dostoyevsky's Underground Man is also static, though presented in the guise of an endless journey. Typically the only escape is death; but death comes to K. only in a village to which he has no claim. The character of Orestes, in Sartre's Les Mouches, is a further embodiment of the modern journeyman who has denied himself the home that embraces the existential validity of true tragedy. He desperately seeks the "joy of going somewhere definite." "Try to understand," he says. "I want my share of memories, my native soil. I want to be a man who belongs to some place."<sup>30</sup> So he returns to Argos, the place of his birth. But the only home Sartre can offer Orestes is a place of death, where the only repeated ritual is not rebirth (expansion), but the ceremony called Dead Man's Day. Orestes can only courageously embrace this world and be engulfed by its citizens and the flies (synonymous with death), in order to affirm his own self and his place on the endless continuum.

Compare Orestes with the Prodigal Son! As with all the parables of the Kingdom, the Christian journey and homecoming are the repeated rehearsal that culminates in the last act of the final drama already begun. The Quest makes sense only in a revelatory view of existence because the journey -- the search for a sense of existence -- becomes

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Jean-Paul Sartre, No Exit and Three Other Plays (New York: Knopf, 1948), p. 90.

the homecoming as it is met by a sense for existence in that which precedes us and is once-for-all our home.

Thus in the Christian structure of cyclical expansion the tragic vision is retained; for it confronts the reality of human existence, and finds its home there. However, it is not as Greek illusion, i.e., the transfiguration and transformation of life *from* life, but *of* life *in* life; for the purpose is not to alleviate the painful consciousness of our suffering condition, but to affirm the certainty of our tragic condition and find the spirit of meaning there.

Thus the fall of man is felt to be simultaneously harrowing and ecstatic, for at the very moment when man is thrown into the deepest despair, at that moment, and at that moment alone, he is made aware of the possibility of realizing the greatest good, and in this way, does good come out of evil.<sup>31</sup>

That is why in the Christian view of existence the tragic conditions are not eliminated, but made more real. Tragedy is not usurped, and suffering is still a tragic event. The Christian is the tragic hero *par excellence*. This is also Weisinger's use of *felix culpa*, the paradox of the fortunate fall ... "the substance out of which tragedy is made."<sup>32</sup> It is in a dynamic participation in the tragic dimension of Christian existence that man can learn *through* his suffering to mitigate suffering. As Weisinger puts it, "the effective force lies in the act."<sup>33</sup>

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Herbert Weisinger, Tragedy and the Paradox of the Fortunate Fall (London: Broadway House, 1966), p. 20.

32

*Ibid.*, p. 269.

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*Ibid.*, p. 271.

It must be obvious by now that the central figure in the drama is not the god, nor the divine king, not the hero, but man himself, projected as god, divine king, or hero, but in the end and always man, man struggling desperately and endlessly to carve out of a chaotic and cruel cosmos a world of order and justice. In a sense, man has never succeeded in that effort, nor in the very nature of the situation, can he possibly succeed. Yet, precisely because he is man, he struggles; he plunges into the terrors of the small moment, he suffers, he dies, but he lives again. *For the very struggle to succeed is a success in itself.*<sup>34</sup>

Ultimate concern is not to be *grasped* but *sought* in the only certainty that gives meaning to that quest -- that is, the tragic condition of man. Redemptive faith is found in the integrating, healing process. Out of this continuing process grows a Christian faith based on the affirmation that ultimate meaning is only approached in loving action in the depths of the tragedy of human experience.

But the Christian -- unless, like many other people, he really *is* self-deceived -- has no such special claim on anyone or anything. He has only a faith -- a faith which is hard to achieve and which affirms little more than this: that Christ has shown by his example that if one loves enough, then the belief that love is stronger than death becomes a part of reality and not just a fine sentiment.<sup>35</sup>

It is such faith, such loving action that is the contemporaneous witness of Christian existence to the universal and final revelation of God in the tragic history of man.

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Ibid.

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Roger L. Cox, Between Heaven and Earth (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), p. 219.



## CONCLUSION

*Some system of cycles there must always be for every historical student, as every man's shadow must fall somewhere on his own landscape; but as his shadow moves with every movement he makes, so his cyclical view of history will shift and dissolve, decompose and recompose itself anew, with every advance in the historical knowledge of the individual and the race.*

R.G. Collingwood<sup>1</sup>

The notion of cycles in history is as old as history itself (and older than conscious history!). Yet if we are to be able to speak of a progress to history in any significant way, it will be the result of an evolutionary-historical approach as has been taken in this thesis. For as we have seen by its very nature history can never show us any ultimate solution or offer any meta-historical meaning for existence in and of itself. Yet by the course of its own development the historical consciousness of man has emerged in a post-historical age in distinct, but mutative, structures of existence. Cyclical-expansion and its modern secular antithesis are the irreversible evolutionary results of this development of history.

Despite the natures of these two diametrically-opposing contemporary structures the inherent essence of all modern historical consciousness remains the Quest -- the endless search for transcendent Being in man. As Frankfort remarks,

For man does not quite succeed in becoming a scientific object to himself. His need of transcending chaotic experience and conflict-

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R.G. Collingwood, Essays in the Philosophy of History (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), p. 89.

ing facts leads him to seek a metaphysical hypothesis that may clarify his urgent problems. On the subject of his 'self' man will, most obstinately, speculate -- even today.<sup>2</sup>

By the use of his mythic imagination -- that dynamic *creating-in-action* -- man has always attempted to express the invisible Whole of Ultimate Reality. The primary mode of expression of such speculative thought is myth, whose compelling validity lies with its endless re-enactment as its own self-affirmation. How does contemporary man conceptualize his myths? The modern secularist/humanist, it has been seen, still clings to the myth of developmental man. It is however, a dead myth; its vitality is but an inevitable illusion man cannot help but acknowledge by the experience of his own existence. Though he knows that myths cannot be interpreted rationally, but only by new myths, he fails to distinguish the transcendent *image* of man from the trappings of anthropological *concepts*.

The modern Christian, on the other hand, is '*at home*' in the myths to which his faith gives order and validity. His quest is based on a structure of recurrence and expansion in which the nature of historical existence is fulfilled and transcended in the full reality of its paradoxical tension. Jesus becomes the transhistorical catalyst to a new historical consciousness affording real and recognizable possibilities for authentic existence. As he warns his first disciples, the world of history will not change:

And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise

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Henri Frankfort, Before Philosophy (London: Penguin Books, 1949), p. 12.

against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places, there will be famines; this is but the beginning of the sufferings. (Mark 13:7-8)

Yet in faith the Christian is to bear witness to God's final and endless revelation -- the revelation that is a process of expansion, culminating in that greater mythical retransformation of this world.

But take heed to yourselves; for they will deliver you up to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them. And the gospel must first be preached to all nations. (Mark 13:9-10)

The Christian community in the modern world is as much a minority group as it ever was. The mark of its identity, the *stigmata* the Christian bears, is a sign of self-denial, of suffering, and of response to Christ's ever-beckoning call: "If any man would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." (Mark 8:34) Jesus is the road; the way is hard. Jesus is our home; we return unto him when we are hard-spent. He is the source and essence of our quest for a sense of existence; he is the foundation of our structure of existence. Jesus *as* Christ *is* the Quest.

Walk while you have the light, lest the darkness overtake you; he who walks in the darkness does not know where he goes. While you have the light, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light. (John 12:35b-36)

In the first edition to John Bunyan's literary fantasy, Pilgrim's Progress, (1678) there is an engraving of the journey made by the character, Christian. It is a map depicting a circular movement inwards from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City at the center. Bunyan's dream is the Christian myth, existentially real but as yet unconsummated. For the Christian life is a journey; and we have

not yet fully arrived. We walk in the light of that Spirit, however, which compels us to uphold the paradoxical tension that constitutes authentic, eternal life. It is in that Spirit that we sing the hymn of that peculiar beauty which characterizes Christian existence.

*God, though this life is but a wraith,  
Although we know not what we use,  
Although we grope with little faith,  
Give me the heart to fight — and lose.*

*Ever insurgent let me be,  
Make me more daring than devout;  
From sleek contentment keep me free,  
And fill me with a buoyant doubt.*

*From compromise and things half done,  
Keep me, with stern and stubborn pride;  
And when at last, the fight is won,  
God, keep me still unsatisfied.*

3  
Louis Untermeyer (1885)

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